RACIAL RECRUITMENT IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA: DILEMMAS OF PRIVATE RECRUITMENT AGENCIES

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Abstract.
This article examines the rhetoric of racial exclusion used by South African private recruitment consultants to justify racist practice and criticise employment equity legislation. Transcribed face-to-face interviews with nine consultants in two urban centres serve as textual evidence. These consultants engaged in a number of rhetorical manoeuvres to justify privileging whites for employment, including blaming their clients and constructing whiteness as normative and blackness as deficient. They provided ostensibly non-racial reasons for privileging whites. The analysis offers insight into the conservation of racial advantage in the context of radical socio-political change.

Keywords: *discourse, racism, rhetoric, recruitment, South Africa*

The history of employment in South Africa was shaped by capitalist exploitation of a racial underclass, firstly under colonial and then under apartheid rule. Historically, job reservation was supported by statutory measures, namely the Regulations of the Mines and Works Act of 1911, the Industrial Conciliation Act, No. 11 of 1924, the Mines and Works Amendment Act of 1926 and the Bantu Labour Amendment Act of 1970. These Acts reserved skilled and responsible positions for, and extend privileges towards, white workers (cf. Wiehahn et al, 1982; Johnstone, 1994; Crankshaw, 1997). Although reforms aimed at deregulating discrimination in employment were introduced in the 1970s and 1980s, these did not translate into real changes in the labour market because of continuing white resistance (Cooper et al, 1988).

Since 1994 South Africa has undergone monumental socio-political transformation. Legislation was developed to outlaw unfair racial discrimination and to redress past imbalances. The Employment Equity Act actively redresses the effects of past unfair discrimination, promoting affirmative action to ensure the "equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce" (Employment Equity Act, 1998:22).

The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000 recognises that "systematic inequalities and unfair discrimination remain deeply embedded in social structures, practices and attitudes" despite the new socio-political dispensation, and makes discrimination a criminal offence (Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, 2000:10).

As was the case with previous reforms, this more forceful and extensive change in policy appears not to have translated into significant changes in practice. Although the vast majority of private companies claim to have implemented employment equity policies, there appears to be little change on the ground. Tables 1, 2 and 3 show that the majority of management and professional jobs are still held by whites, and that between 1995 and 1999, there was no increase in the proportion of black people in higher paid white collar employment. Note that the term "black" is used as per the Employment Equity Act to mean Africans, Coloureds and Indians.
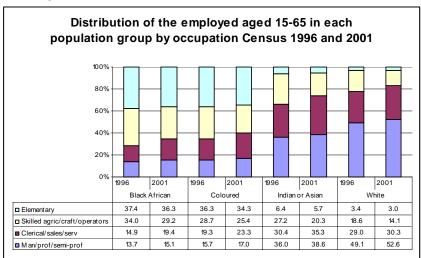
TABLE 1

Change in occupation within population groups October 1995 and October 1999 (Proportion of total for "race" category)							
Occupation	African		Coloured		Indian		White	
	1995	1999	*1995*	1999	*1995*	1999	*1995*	1999
Elementary	*40.5%*	33.3%	*40.0%*	32.7%	*6.0%*	**7.8%**	*1.8%*	**3.3%**
Artisan/Operator	*25.0%*	**32.9%**	*27.6%*	**29.2%**	*29.4%*	24.8%	*22.0%*	15.8%
Clerk / Sales	*19.6%*	19.5%	*22.4%*	**22.7%**	*34.9%*	33.3%	*34.4%*	29.9%
Man. / Prof	*14.9%*	14.3%	*10.0%*	**15.4%**	*29.6%*	**34.0%**	*41.8%*	**51.0%**
(Statistics South Africa: October household survey of 1999, 57)								

TABLE 2

"Race" Group	Top Management (%)	Professionally qualified & experienced specialists and mid-management (%)
African female	2.6	3.9
African male	9.7	10.1
Coloured female	0.6	1.1
Coloured male	0.6	3.5
Indian female	0.0	2.2
Indian male	2.6	5.7
White female	11.0	21.7
White male	72.9	51.8

Sunday Times Business Times July 7 2002

TABLE 3

Distribution of the employed aged 15-65 in each population group by occupation Census 1996 and 2001

	Black African 1996	Black African 2001	Coloured 1996	Coloured 2001	Indian or Asian 1996	Indian or Asian 2001	White 1996	White 2001
□ Elementary	37.4	36.3	36.3	34.3	6.4	5.7	3.4	3.0
□ Skilled agric/craft/operators	34.0	29.2	28.7	25.4	27.2	20.3	18.6	14.1
■ Clerical/sales/serv	14.9	19.4	19.3	23.3	30.4	35.3	29.0	30.3
■ Man/prof/semi-prof	13.7	15.1	15.7	17.0	36.0	38.6	49.1	52.6

Statistics South Africa: Primary Tables South Africa: '90 and 2001 compared, 62

How is it possible that little actual change has taken place during a period in which norms, laws and political structures have changed in such a fundamental manner? There is some suggestion that, as was the case earlier, white employers and workers resist transformation and specifically the implementation of the employment equity legislation (FSA – Contact survey cited in Sidiropolous et al, 1998; Deloitte & Touché Human Capital Corporation, 2001:52).

However, it cannot only be attitudes that are responsible for lack of change. These attitudes must find practical institutional ways of being implemented without falling foul of the law. This paper focuses on the role of private recruitment agencies in the conservation in racial employment practices. Alongside the changes in labour legislation that occurred in the 1990s, non-core aspects of business such as recruitment have been increasingly outsourced, and the number of private recruitment agencies has grown substantially (Department of Manpower, 1987; Central Statistical Services, 1988; Central Statistical Services, 1997). Since such private agencies act as gatekeepers to employment – they recommend some candidates to clients but not others – they may contribute to promoting whites in employment practices. There is some suggestion that this might be the case. For example, Hunter et al (2000) found that only eight percent of newspaper advertisements by private recruitment agencies contained "equal opportunity" specifications, in comparison with twenty four percent of adverts by direct employers. This paper shows how a sample of consultants' talk about race and equity in employment, and explains why they make choices and decisions that favour whites over blacks.

NEGOTIATING TALK AND TEXT.
We used the method of discourse analysis (Potter & Edwards, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1994) to study how recruitment consultants described and justified their practices. In particular, we investigated the language and arguments put forward to justify racial discrimination in recruitment whilst consultants attempted to maintain their position

within the "moral community of the unprejudiced" (Billig, 1988:99). Through close attention to the detail of talk, we show the tacit procedures and commonplace knowledge out of which social order – in this case, the maintenance of certain historical power relations based on "race" – is constituted.

Rather than focus in on prejudice, bias or racist attitudes, discourse analysts study racial discourse with a view to showing the conventional ways in which people can defend racial practices in our society (Potter, 1998; Edwards, 2003). Such defences are responsive to the conversational (Shotter, 1993) and rhetorical (Billig, 1996) demands on the speaker; and variation in individual attitudes is expressed as speakers respond to these shifting demands (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Since such defences are geared to persuading an audience, they are considered to be collective, socially shared strategies, or the "ethnomethods" of a particular society. Speakers use commonsense and commonplace arguments to make convincing defences of their attitudes. Thus a study of racial discourse reveals the reasonable ways in which people defend racial discrimination. In this paper we examine the way in which recruitment consultants manage the dilemma of handling racially based requests in a discriminatory manner whilst denying racism (Wetherell & Potter, 1992:97). The "good reasons" they provide justify the kinds of discrimination that are doing the work of ensuring racial exclusion in post-apartheid South Africa.

The sample consisted of nine individual consultants from nine separate recruitment agencies in two urban centres in South Africa. These consultants agreed to participate in face-to-face semi-structured interviews at their place of work. The face-to-face interviews were conducted over a period of two years (2000 – 2001). Most of the consultants reported over five (5) years experience in the industry. Many of these consultants were the managers / owners of the agency.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview schedule (see Appendix 1) designed to access consultant's talk around the following topics: (1) how conversations with clients unfolded when requests for candidates were made using racial criteria; (2) opinions about the principle and practice of employment equity; and (3) what changes had occurred in their industry over the last decade and how they (and their clients) spoke about and responded to these changes.

The reading of the text commenced with transcribing the audiotapes (see transcription conventions in Appendix 2). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and in their entirety by the first researcher. Transcripts were read on numerous occasions, first to identify themes, and later for a detailed analysis of sections of talk located in the context of preceding and proceeding turns-of-talk. To ensure anonymity consultants gender and agency details are omitted and they are simply referred to as S1, S2 etc.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.
Early in the analysis it became clear that the respondents found racial recruiting dilemmatic. At once there were the demands of a racially oriented and exclusionary labour market in which they practiced, and the demands from legislation and widely accepted values of non-racism and equality. The conflict between racism and equality was pervasive and explicit in the interviews.

Extract 1.
Res: And this is what I kind of figured (.) and I'm wondering how (.) how you would handle that? (racially based requests)
S1: Ja (.) well we are kind of **caught between a rock and a hard place** because
Res: Hmm
S1: Because we have a database of <u>exceptionally</u> good candidates (.)
Res: // Hm, mm
S1: (.) but **people** are still somehow reluctant to accept **people** into the formal work place.

Extract 2.
S2: Ja, we do, we <u>do</u> inform them that they cannot (.) that they are actually not (.) um (.) **legally <u>right</u>** (.) um to request a white or a black or a (.) any specific race or gender. Um (.) It's like I said to you earlier. A guy does (.) when he (.) when he said to me he wanted a white there was sort of **nervous giggle <u>before</u> saying that**. So, **they are very aware** (.) the clients are very aware that **they may not <u>do</u> what they are <u>doing</u>**. The problem is we don't have (.) like I said to you (.) **we don't have a choice**

Extract 3.
S3: (Preceding question concerns how the consultant responds to racially based requests). **You need to make placements. You need to make money**. So, if a client says to you um "I'm looking for a white female for that position". You, you need to say to yourself, **"Do I say to him I'm sorry I will not just send you white females, I will send you males and females of all colours that are capable of doing this position? Do you say that and risk losing that client?** Because, **let's face it what that client will do is say: "If you don't want to supply me with the staff, I will go to another agency"** … So, it is very, very difficult and I think coming from a smaller agency, rather than a larger agency. Smaller agencies need, they **need** those placements. They **cannot be too selective** in turning clients away or not …**You need to survive**

The three extracts above show that recruitment consultants find themselves in a dilemmatical situation when clients phone in with a job specification like "I'm looking for a white female for that position" (Extract 3), said with or without a hint of nervousness (Extract 2). The consultants know full well that it is illegal to recruit prospective employees on racial (and/or gender) grounds that have nothing to do with job performance or equity targets; but on the other hand, in order to survive in business, they feel that they have to accept these requests. So, they are "caught between a rock and a hard place" (Extract 1), as they experience themselves as not having a choice (Extract 2) and needing to concede to the racially based requests in order to survive in the business world (Extract 3).

The problem for consultants is not simply that clients make racially based requests. The problem is how they can position themselves as non-racist and defend their practices given that fulfilling such briefs is illegal if they are not in terms of existing Employment Equity plans and affirmative action policies but also counter-normative. We can already see how they construct the dilemma in a self serving way. Although it is possible to construct their practices less sympathetically as blatant and illegal racism for financial gain, in presenting the dilemma the consultants portray themselves as powerless

victims who have no choice but act as they do in the interests of survival. It is the clients, those nameless "people" out-there (see Extract 1) who place consultants in the difficult position of having to respond to illegal requests, when they know full well that they are illegal (Extract 2). In the remainder of the analysis we examine three interlocking rhetorical strategies the consultants employ in resolving this dilemma: (1) shifting the blame, (2) the construction of whiteness and blackness, and (3) the denial of racism.

SHIFTING THE BLAME.
According to van Dijk (1992:109) "Racism is always *elsewhere*, and always the property of the *others*". The interviewees certainly used this strategy of shifting the blame for racial recruiting onto their clients. Two ways are identified in the extracts below, namely excusing and justification.

Extract 4.

S3: Hmm. But I also think that clients out there **use the agencies as scapegoats**. Because what they are doing is they are saying, "We want a white person for this position". Now if we were to run the ads ourselves or do the recruitment ourselves, we **will open ourselves up to problems**

Res: mm

S3: with the public. With the employees out there. That we **could get into trouble** for focusing on white candidates only

Res: [cough]

S3: But, if we give it to an external organisation to handle our recruitment on our behalf. Um, we take the risk away from ourselves.

There were two ways in which consultants shift the blame. First, the clients were portrayed as wilfully and deliberately using the consultants to do their dirty work for them (Extracts 3, 4). Note how direct and explicit their requests for white people are in these two extracts. The clients are powerful and dictate, whereas the consultants are powerless scapegoats who have to process the requests or else lose the business to other agencies. Second, the consultants portray themselves as willing and equipped to recruit on a non-racial basis. In Extract 1, the consultant points out that they have a "database of exceptionally good candidates", which he suggests includes people of all races who other people – clients – are reluctant to accept in to the formal workplace; and in Extract 2 the consultant says that they warn clients that racial recruiting is illegal. By shifting the blame, not only do the consultants portray themselves as helpless victims of the dictates of the clients, but as actually working in the interests of non-racism, and in line with their own self-interest, trying to educate clients on the law and making their multi-racial pool of candidates available for recruitment.

However, shifting the blame does not only involve a defensive rhetoric of excuse. It also includes an offensive rhetoric of justification. This is apparent in the final utterance in Extract 3 where the consultant recognizes that she has got people that she can put into those positions. The job specifications give her the opportunity to do business, and in order to survive she must satisfy the client's requests. Here we see the legitimating ideology for shifting the blame: recruiting is a service industry, and consultants are required to satisfy the needs of clients to risk not losing business.

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Extract 5.

S1: Mmm (.) Um, it's not a bad thing. The way I see it we're in the business to recruit and place people. **Um, if I was in the industry and if I was a butcher and someone told me I want a lamb chop with no fat on it. I would give them a lamb chop with no fat on it.** Um, if someone comes to me and says I want a PA who's white with Word, Excel, PowerPoint. That is what I'll give them. So in my knowledge I am giving the client, I am <u>seeing</u> to <u>his</u> needs. Um, which is **what I am being paid to do at the end of the day and that is why I am here** … It's to generate money for the company and to provide my client with what he **needs**.
Res: Mmm, mmm
S1: … It's **just** that <u>we</u> **are in the business to suit their needs** … So <u>we</u> can't challenge them. **We are not in a position to challenge** … We are not in a power position at all**. They hold the key**. And if <u>they</u>, we challenge them [inaudible] then they'll give us [inaudible]
Res: <u>Mmm</u>, <u>mmm</u>
S1: So **it's about money**. It boils down to giving **good customer service**

In Extract 5, race based recruiting is now "not a bad thing". This is because the legitimating ideology of doing business dictates that consultants should recruit and place people whom their clients request and need. The concluding utterance sums up this logic: to generate income, the consultant must provide good customer service. This means giving clients what they require. If they require a PA skilled in Word, Excel, PowerPoint, then the consultant has a duty to oblige. Likewise, if they require a PA who is white, the consultant should service their needs.

Although this legitimating ideology allows the consultants to move onto the offensive, it itself must be carefully constructed. The practice of racial recruiting must be portrayed as "business as usual", just as a butcher would reasonably supply a lamb chop when requested. This is done by showing that clients treat consultants in this way: The consultants use reported direct speech to show how clients make race-based requests (Extracts 3, 4) and race is slipped into a request for a PA alongside other reasonable requirements for computer skills. Accordingly race-based recruiting is normalised as "just" doing business as usual, meeting client's needs (Extract 5). This allows S1 to move from being positioned as a reluctant accomplice, caught between a rock and a hard place (Extract 1), to an advocate of racial recruiting being good customer service and not a bad thing.

CONSTRUCTING WHITENESS AND BLACKNESS.
In South Africa, as elsewhere, white privilege continues to be defended in spite of, and often in terms of, the language of equality (cf. Steyn, 2001). Ostensibly race neutral discourses of merit and standards are used in a colour-blind way to subtly construct racial difference, portraying whiteness as a norm or standard against which blackness is found to be deficient. Colour-blind discourse is a powerful means of defence because it draws on commonplace understandings that "all should be treated equally, regardless of race", to justify unequal outcomes. Speakers argue that they apply criteria such as merit or standards in an even-handed way, and are thus not to blame for unequal racial outcomes. However, by applying such reasoning, not only must they show themselves content with unequal outcomes, but must also provide arguments about why blacks are found to be wanting. Accordingly, this discourse serves as an implicit way of

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constructing hierarchical race differences. The following extracts show how consultants constructed race as a category based on "real" differences, not only in terms of colour but also employability. Implicit in these arguments is the view that whites provide the norms against which merit and standards are to be judged and blacks are found deficient.

Extract 6.
S3: And I can tell you right now, it's happened over and over and over again where you sway your client about having a mindset about employing a **white** female, eventually employing a **person of colour …** I think it is **experience**, um but I think also at the end of the day the client will respect you so much more if you (.) <u>**can**</u> **make a judgement call by producing the** <u>**best**</u> person for that position. And I think that, that is paramount. I think that is the one thing that agencies should be. At the end of the day we must try and do, supply the **most suitable** candidate, the **most** <u>**capable**</u> candidate.. Because **you've got to deliver a service to that client**. The service to your client is supplying them with the best labour force. And if **I believe, in my experience** and I can **stand behind it** that <u>this</u> individual, **being of a different colour**, is <u>**most**</u> **suitable**, that's the person I am selling to my client. That is [inaudible] because that is what I firmly believe in.

Extract 7.
S4: You know, at the end of the day it's the **person who has the competence to do the job**. That is more and more what our employers are saying. Anybody, as long as they can do the job
Res: (//) as they can do the job.
S4: If it's a black person, I'll probably take that in preference. If the **white male can do the job** and **the black person can't**, I'm **not going to take the black person**. Actually, that's what the **legislation says**. It doesn't say you should just take somebody on their colour but on their ability or their potential.

In Extract 6, S3 positions themselves as an agent of change, persuading the client to employ a "person of colour" in a context where there is a prejudice (mindset) in favour of whites. S3 develops the theme that consultants are there to service the needs of clients by arguing that the best way to do this is to find the "most suitable" and "most capable" candidates to do the job. The client's racism may get in the way of achieving this aim, and so it is incumbent on the consultant to educate their clients, producing the "best person for that position", and thus gain the client's respect for having a job well done. Once again, by applying this legitimating ideology of servicing client needs – now by applying non-racial judgements of suitability – S3 can boldly defend their practice as something "I firmly believe in". Similarly, S4 also says that candidate preference is based on "competence to do the job", not race; and argues that if they show any preference it in fact will be in the favour of an equally competent black candidate.

At once, such discourse is both de-racialized and racist. On the one hand, the language of racial neutrality that is used to show that all prospective employees are treated equally and are given a fair chance of being promoted to the client. Seemingly, selection is about individual merit, and not about race; but despite this colour-blind individualism, whiteness continues to act as the implicit normative framework for competence. See the last sentence of Extract 6. If the consultant finds that an individual "being of a different

colour, is most suitable", then he/she will promote that person. This assumes (1) that white is a default colour and (2) that the default is usually or typically the most suitable. Of course this does not exclude blacks categorically or as a matter of course, but it does perpetuate the stereotype of white competence, which underpins practices of privileging whites.

The explicit argument that race is irrelevant in recruitment functions as a distracter by directing attention away from an alternative racial construction of competence. First, despite arguing that selection is made on the basis of colour-blind criteria focusing on individuals' suitability and competence, the consultants all find it necessary to revert to a racial register to report that the competent person happened to be "of a different colour" (Extract 6), or that the white candidate could do the job whereas the black could not (Extract 7). The reason for the use of racial categories is that the consultants find or discover racial differences in competence as they try to apply their even-handed selection. These accounts leave open the troubling question as to why blacks are less competent and thus continue to be promoted less often than whites while consultants like S3 and S4 not only act even-handedly, but embrace the spirit of Employment Equity legislation and indeed favour blacks.

The extracts below show how, on the basis of colour-blind individualism and ostensible fairness, it was possible for the consultants to defend unequal racial outcomes, grounded in implicit stereotypes of black incompetence, all the while distancing themselves from potential allegations of racism.

Extract 8.
S5: If you're looking for an executive secretary [inaudible] **good** person. **You're not really looking for an African person who might battle a bit with [inaudible] English or the computer**. Yourself (.) you judge the situation and you are forwarding only your most **high-powered** white secretaries because they (.) um, computers (.) Your **African secretaries are not really computer [literate]. But, I don't know maybe I am saying the wrong things now [laughs]**. But if I am looking for an executive secretary **I don't even look at affirmative action**. Clients don't have to say anything **because his secretary is white** and he is looking for a white lady
Res: Okay. So it is completely unspoken (.) unsaid
S5: Yes. The **client may be an African person himself. Or like I had an Indian client who was looking for a white secretary**. [inaudible] quite open. Although I did put forward a coloured [inaudible] can do well.

The consultant's use of the race of the client also helps to distance them from potential allegations of racism.

THE DENIAL OF RACISM.
An important part of the denial of racism is to construct black job seekers as deficient whilst positioning themselves as above reproach and white as the norm.

Extract 9.
S2: So (.) um but when they have to say to you they actually are looking for a white person they do get a bit nervous. I have another client who specifically requests white

managers … He's got different butcheries. The **reason he asks for white though is for another reason**. The butcheries are in a predominantly black area.
Res: Okay
S2: And he says that **unfortunately** (.) um to employ a black manager in a black butchery that caters to **black people** (.) they **are intimidated very easily**. He doesn't want an Indian or a black because he says they are **intimidated too easily**. That is why he's requested white male managers, not females … And because of that he says that he **prefers** to have **white males**. Because they're **not intimidated** … **That is purely the reason. Not a (.) not anything else (.) uh** but because he (.) they sell to the black industry.
Res: Mmm
S2: **They are always in a fairly (.) not a nice area**. The butcheries are generally situated in **many not nice areas** and um (.) he feels (.) he feels. **This is from experience that he has actually had problems with Indian and black managers**.

Extract 10.
S6: I mean there are certain areas in our business where we have failed. I mean I **would call it cultures**. But the way we work (.) I mean our consultants, I'm thinking of XXX largely where they've had these experiences
Res: Hmm
S6: are **highly incentivized**
Res: Hmm
S6: and in fact in all of the cases of our top consultants
Res: Hmm, mm
S6: they produce **serious numbers** and they make **serious money**. We have **never been able to bring black person in with a belief in themselves**
Res: Hmm
S6: except one. After their, (.) eventually when things have got so [inaudible] **left with a total disaster behind them**. Start again and bring somebody else in. **We go to great lengths to identify our needs and get someone with the right attitude and the right skills**
Res: Hmm
S6: **We have spent hundreds of hundreds of thousands of rands. Millions** and every single one has failed. There, there just seems to be (.) a **lack of entrepreneurial** (.) of (.) **talent**. And if they exist we can't find them … Because it is all been done in the **best of intentions from our side** to really really transform our business but every single time.

In Extracts 8, 9 and 10 the privileging of white candidates is rationalised by constructing black job applicants as deficient in various ways. S5 explains why it is necessary to put forward a "white lady" for the job of executive secretary. This position requires a high-powered person, and accordingly the consultant doesn't even look at affirmative action – i.e. black – candidates. The problem is that African secretaries are not computer literate and are unable to speak proper English. The justification for this recruitment practice falls on the constructed deficiencies of the black candidate and not the consultant. S2 has a client that "prefers" white men to manage his butcheries. The reason is based on his experience – he "actually had problems with Indian and black managers" – that whites are less easily intimidated in the context than are black and Indian managers. The consultant emphasises that this is "purely" the reason for the

preference for whites, suggesting that it has nothing to do with anything else, presumably including racism.

All three of the extracts reproduce racial stereotypes. It is noteworthy that although S5 relies on stereotypes of blacks as technologically backward and lacking in English language skills, the stereotypes are not categorical. Unlike the crude stereotypes of the past, which were based on biological notions of race differences, the consultant speaks in a way that does not preclude the possibility of finding a high-powered black secretary. The problem with the African secretary is that they "might" be "a bit" deficient. The same is true of the stereotypes S2 produces about blacks and Indians being easily intimidated. This is not a congenital character flaw but a tendency that has been observed from previous experience. The stereotypes are an unfortunate probability rather than a necessary racial condition. As such, is it not the product of a bigoted mind, and hence black and Indian clients would make the same race-based candidate requests (See Extract 8). By so presenting non-categorical or probabilistic stereotypes S5 leaves an opening to counter potential allegations of racism. However, since there is a tacit agreement between consultant and client that a white lady is required to fill a high-powered position, it is unlikely that such racially slanted employment practice would be challenged.

In Extract 10, S6 explains why there are so few blacks in the recruitment industry, and particularly in this agency. Although this observation could be attributed to structural causes – e.g. that the industry services the racist requirements of white business and would thus be unwelcoming to blacks – S6 instead focuses on the deficiencies of black consultants. In comparison with white consultants, who meet the requirements of the job, blacks are not highly "incentivized", they have no belief in themselves, they don't have the right attitude or the right skills, and they lack entrepreneurial talent. Hence they don't succeed at the job. It is "their" deficiencies that account for their exclusion, not prejudice within the industry (cf. Billig et al, 1988:108).

The narrative in Extract 10 is a form of empiricist accounting, based on the experiences of S6. According to Edwards and Potter (1992), such narratives of personal experience are rhetorically powerful because they emphasise veracity of the account while they are ultimately unverifiable. The account tells of the great lengths to which the consultant has gone to recruit a black consultant. The firm "went to great lengths", "spent hundreds of thousands of rands", and has tried out a number of different potential candidates, but each time they failed despite the "very best intentions from [their] side". In the face of all this effort and goodwill, the implication is that is must be something about blacks themselves that accounts for their absence from the industry.

As was the case in Extract 8, in this extract S6 develops non-categorical probabilistic racial stereotypes which do the work of justifying racial exclusion, but which are easily defended as not racist. Rather than blacks being constructed as biologically deficient, the racial differences are attributed to culture (cf. Durrheim & Dixon, 2000). While this continues to suggest that race differences are natural, ingrained and widespread, it makes for a looser, non-necessary connection between race category and deficiency than does biological discourse: It is always possible – at least theoretically – to shrug off the effects of culture. Non-categorical stereotyping, grounded in cultural discourse, provides a rationale for the effort the consultant has put into finding a suitable black

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candidate. The effort wouldn't be rational if there were no chance of success. Unfortunately, though, lack of success has turned out to be an empirical fact – "even if they did exist we can't find them" – suggesting that the stereotype is true for all intents and purposes.

This is a very useful and rhetorically powerful means of grounding racial exclusion in a post-apartheid context. Since it doesn't rely on crude stereotyping, positing inherent racial inferiority it is easy to defend the stereotyping as not racist. It is also possible for speakers to use this to portray themselves as sympathetic to blacks who – due to no fault of their own, or a terrible racist past – are found unsuitable. Finally, it also allows speakers to make a display of the effort they have put into looking for suitable candidates that have managed to shrug off the lamentable effects of culture (cf. Goldberg, 1997).

In sum, the construction of blacks as deficient in terms of skills, experience and personality works alongside the construction of white as the norm. This allows for the conservation of racial hierarchy and racial privilege in post-apartheid South Africa. Consultants' (and clients') practice of recruiting white candidates is positioned as reasonable and understandable; while black failings are used to explain why blacks have not attained positions in the private sector (cf. Duncan, 1996; Stevens, 1998).

CONCLUSION.
Under the system of apartheid in South Africa access to employment was regulated on racial grounds. The job market was governed by a swathe of legislation that reserved certain classes of (responsible, higher paid) employment for whites at the expense of a black proletariat. A striking fact about transformation in South Africa is that sharp disparities in racial employment patterns continue despite the fact that job reservation was abolished in the 1980s and racism outlawed and affirmative action introduced in the 1990s. Despite these changes there appears to be little change in the predominance of white males in senior and management positions. This paper asked whether the private recruitment industry plays a role in securing white privilege, and sought to investigate how such practices were justified.

The vast majority of recruitment consultants we contacted were not willing to participate in the study, but all nine that agreed to face-to-face interviews admitted that racial recruiting posed a dilemma for them. On the one hand they routinely received race-based requests from their clients, and felt pressured to fill them, while they realized that such practices were not only frowned upon but illegal. Following the lead of a number of writers who suggest that contemporary forms of racial talk are characterised by vigorous denials of racism (Billig, 1988; van Dijk, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), we sought to investigate how consultants defended their practices as reasonable. We sought to map out what Billig et al (1988) call the "contrary themes of reasonable prejudice".

The consultants used two strategies to defend their practice. First, they blamed their clients for making race-based requests and they justified acceding to the requests by means of the legitimating ideology that they were in business to service clients needs. Second, by presenting non-racial criteria for candidate selection the consultants could show that preferences for whites were not motivated by racism but arose due to the failings of blacks. The consultants reproduced stereotypes about blacks being deficient

which were non-categorical and probabilistic: deficiency was an unfortunate empirical fact not a necessary condition. Accordingly they could portray themselves as members of the moral community of the non-prejudiced by suggesting that discrimination was reasonable but not necessary by supporting efforts to change the status quo. Discrimination in employment in South Africa has changed from being an indefensible legislative requirement to being a regrettable but reasonable necessity.

APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.

- Can you give me some idea of the activities you engage in every week?
- As far as job specs go, can you tell me more about them? What is a job spec? What are the sorts of things included in taking down a job spec? How does one go filling one? Etc.
- How would a client typically ask for a job spec? How would the conversation go?
- Have you received job specs from clients that have been difficult to meet? If so, what kind of job specs are these? Can you give me an example? What made this particular job spec difficult to meet?
- What proportion of clients request candidates along racial lines?
- What sorts of jobs are these usually?
- Why do you think they make these requests for these sorts of jobs?
- How does the organisation respond to these requests?
- How has the organisation and your clients responded to the employment equity legislation?
- Are there any differences in the way the organisation makes sense of requests for "black" and "white" candidates and if so how?
- Is the way that you respond to racially based requests the same or different from how other consultants respond? How do you select and identify candidates on racial grounds? (Get details from them regarding advertising, looking for candidates on their books etc.)
- How do other consultants talk about racially based requests?
- How does the organisation talk about / discuss these requests?
- Has the organisation / you changed the way you work since the passing of Employment Equity legislation? If so what are these changes?
- Does the organisation have some sort of policy around this issue? Can you show it to me?
- What do you think about this policy? How does it work?

APPENDIX 2: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS.

The following illustrates the main transcribing conventions used:

- A double oblique (//) marks the starts of overlap in talk (//).
- Pauses were not timed, but marked with a dot in parentheses – (.)
- Unclear or inaudible hearings are indicated in square brackets – [ ]
- Speech "errors" and particles (e.g. umm, hmmm) which are not complete / full words are included.
- Emphasis on the part of the speaker has been indicated by underlining – really
- Commas, full stops and question marks have been included to improve the readability of the extracts.

Any reference to location or other identifying talk is noted by using three x's – XXX

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