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Self-identity and discourses of race : exploring a group of white South Africans' narratives of early experiences of racism.

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ABSTRACT

This research project falls under the broader Apartheid Archives Project. The aim of the project was to collect the narratives of black and white South Africans, of their earliest quotidian or everyday racist experiences. This project focused particularly on the nature of the experiences of racism of (particularly 'ordinary') white South Africans under the old apartheid order and their continuing effects on individual and group functioning in contemporary South Africa, especially on the ways in which white South Africans are positioned by racialised discourses and the reproduction of power relations through these positions. The project utilised narratives that were written by white South Africans and were available on the Apartheid Archive Project's database. In total, the narratives of twelve white, middle-aged, middle class South Africans were analysed using Parker (1992) and Willig's (2008) guidelines for analysis of the discourses which converge with Foucault's ideas. This research report gives prominence to the discourses of race present in the narratives of white South Africans which were examined and it also focuses on how racialised discourses offer the narrators different subject positions to occupy in present day South Africa. Three discursive themes were identified, namely rationalising discursive strategies, race and racism discourses and discourses of redemption. Rationalising discursive strategies were found to utilise discourses of innocence, discourses of denial and discourses that avoid complicity. These discourses enabled the narrators to be positioned as victims. Race and racism discourses included othering discourses, discourses of whiteness and discourses of interracial relationships. Through an appeal to these kinds of discourses narrators were able to occupy opposing positions, such as perpetrator, hero, privileged and non-racial. Finally, discourses of redemption were also found to be prominent in the narratives. These comprised of religious discourses and notions of white liberalism. The utilisation of such discourses enabled constructions of the narrators as moral, virtuous and honest.

Key words

Whiteness, race, racism, the Apartheid Archive Project, narratives, discourses and Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA).