

# Unveiling Whiteness within organisations working with people of refugee background

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## Abstract

This article explores how Australian social workers who work with people resettling interpret Whiteness operating within organisational practices and contexts. Eight White Tasmanian social workers participated in a multimethod qualitative study informed by relationality and a dialogical framework. The research data were analysed using narrative analysis. Participants reported that Whiteness operated through workplace climate, culture and practices, and how physical spaces are constructed. Whilst the majority reported feeling discomfort about these contexts and practices, many had not spoken up or challenged Whiteness within organisations, affirming and perpetuating Whiteness. This research highlights the importance of social workers becoming actively involved in decision-making that explores alternatives to dominant approaches to refugee resettlement. Given the research suggests that knowing about Whiteness does not guarantee action, social workers also need to explore strategies for ensuring that they speak up to challenge Whiteness. However, service delivery models which are refugee-led and/or refugee-staffed organisations, or who utilise accountability practices are alternatives requiring more attention.

**Keywords:** complicity, organisational contexts, organisational practices, people of refugee background, social work, Whiteness

*Accepted: October 2022*

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## Introduction

Whiteness has been defined as ‘the invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism and the law’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, p. viii). Critical studies of Whiteness form an overarching conceptual framework for this research article. Levine-Rasky (2002, p. 2) defined a critical examination of Whiteness as a:

Systemic interrogation of such things as its social and historical dimensions; the denial and legitimation of white hegemony; the texts in which whiteness is read; how whiteness is constructed and practiced; how it structures social relations; how it produces power and is produced by power; the problem and contradictions of white pluralism; how it converges with other social categories that modify and fortify white privilege; and the diffuse tensions attending the question of how to prompt whites to challenge the social order from which they benefit.

In this article, I also discuss White supremacy. Whilst commonly associated with the behaviours of extremist groups, here I am taking on Kendall’s definition of White supremacy, understood broadly as the supremacy of the White race (2013).

Within Australia, many scholars have drawn attention to how Whiteness operates within the social work profession. There is a consensus of opinion that our profession is built upon Western knowledge, which for the most part has been unacknowledged. Further, there is a need for social workers to interrogate our own privilege (Young, 2004; Young and Zubrzycki, 2011; Walter *et al.*, 2013). Professionalism and the importance placed on having a professional identity is an important aspect of social work in the West (Bennett and Zubrzycki, 2003). Some of the aspects of a professional social work identity include the social worker being seen as having expert knowledge (Briskman, 2008), the prioritising of individualistic over collectivist values (Hosken *et al.*, 2016), and client relationships where the worker is in control, and holds the power (Baltra-Ulloa, 2018).

There is currently a lack of research that explicitly explores how Whiteness operates and manifests. This research is one of the first internationally to explore social work with people of refugee background with a focus on Whiteness. The article provides unique insights through the exploration of concrete examples, offering significant contributions to the social work profession and the critical Whiteness studies literature more broadly. More findings from this study, focusing on the personal practices of White social workers have been published elsewhere (Vincent, 2022).

Before commencing further, I will locate myself as the primary researcher and author of this piece of scholarship. I am a social work academic, raised in Tasmania, Australia. I am thirty-three years old; I am a

middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender woman. I also identify as a White Euro-Australian.

## The literature: Refugee resettlement and people seeking asylum

In recent years, the literature exploring practice with people of refugee background and people seeking asylum has grown; however, the majority focuses on the clients' resettlement experiences and needs rather than turning the lens onto the workers and organisations providing services. There are both Australian and international studies that critically analyse the current position of workers, including social workers and the organisations providing support, and this is of significance to the current article. Whilst some of this literature is not specifically social work focused (for example, focused on psychologists and healthcare workers), it is relevant to this study because social workers frequently work with a variety of professionals, especially in the healthcare sector.

The literature analysing the current position of workers and organisations supporting people of refugee background and people seeking asylum comes from a variety of countries. Each country has its own socio-political–historical context relating to asylum-seeking and refugee resettlement, and therefore it is important not to generalise this literature. However, there are some common themes this literature highlights. One-size fits all approaches to how organisations operate and deliver services and the privileging of White Western ways of knowing, being and doing are commonly problematised (Kidson, 1993; Waxman, 1998; Codrington *et al.*, 2011; Farley *et al.*, 2014; Robinson, 2014; Jewson *et al.*, 2015; Kandasamy and Soldatic, 2018; Dalikeni, 2021). This includes bureaucratic process within organisations, workers being unable to work with the flexibility required with this cohort of clients, as well as White Western definitions and approaches guiding how work is done. Many of these studies also highlight service delivery as culturally inappropriate.

Another theme relates to the importance placed on professional boundaries, which can be hard to maintain (Century *et al.*, 2007; Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani, 2011), as well as a lack of appropriate supervision or professional development for staff (Robinson, 2014). Another common theme within the literature is the emphasised need by workers for a focus on relationality, mutuality and dialogue when working with people of refugee background and those seeking asylum (Russell and White, 2001; Codrington *et al.*, 2011; Baltra-Ulloa, 2014; Robinson, 2014; Jewson *et al.*, 2015; Dalikeni, 2021; Larkin and Lefevre, 2020), contrasting with White Western approaches to service delivery which can be fast-paced and focused on market principles, professionalism and the worker expertise. Whilst the literature explored in this section does highlight examples

of how Whiteness operates, most of this research does not explicitly analyse or discuss Whiteness.

## Methodology and methods

### Methodology

The current study was informed by relationality and a dialogical framework. [Hollinsworth \(2016\)](#), exploring the resistance of White people coming to understand their privilege, discussed the importance of dialogue in this process. I met with each participant multiple times to build a trusting relationship. I aimed to create spaces where participants could have conversations that are usually avoided, conversations about race, Whiteness, power and privilege. As a White social worker also learning about Whiteness, interrogating Whiteness within my own life and practice and working with people from the refugee arrived communities, it was appropriate that the approach to the research was one of co-learning and mutuality ([Baltra-Ulloa, 2018](#)), described by Curry-Stevens as a 'shared inquiry' (2007, p. 34).

Critical reflection also informed the research methodology. The critically reflective questions that guided the interviews shifted away from focusing predominantly on individual acts of reflection, towards what is described by [Taylor \(2013\)](#) as 'a more politically nuanced treatment of social work as collective practice, which examines the everyday routines of practice' (p. 86). Questions also focused on social workers interrogating their own Whiteness. This focus aimed to address criticisms that critical reflection tends to focus on oppression without analysing how 'privilege is constructed and maintained' ([Pease, 2006](#), p. 17).

Decolonisation also informed this research. [Briskman \(2008\)](#) defined an attempt to decolonise social work as involving an attempt to let go of power and control, to challenge the importance placed on professionalism and the idea that we as workers hold within us expert knowledge. Adopting a decolonising lens related to how I approached the construction of this project and my role within it. I prioritised a relational approach with participants to challenge the idea that I have expert status. A decolonising lens were also adopted when constructing the method, designed to not only make Whiteness visible but also disrupt Whiteness and the dominant ways of thinking, being and doing.

### Methods

The sample included eight White social workers working in Tasmania, Australia. If a person had a social work qualification, identified as being

White and had experience working with people of refugee background and/or people seeking asylum, they met the requirements for participation in this study. The research was focused specifically on social work practice with these groups to contain the project to an appropriate size for PhD research. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Tasmania's human research ethics committee. Participants gave informed written consent during the first interview.

From an intersectional approach, not everybody's experience of Whiteness will be the same as each person will also have experiences of privilege and oppression based on their other social statuses (Curry-Stevens, 2007; Pease, 2010). Six participants identified as female and two identified as male. Six identified as middle-class, one person identified as working-class, and one did not provide this information. Five reported being between the ages of fifty to sixty-five, two reported being between thirty-five and forty-nine years old and one participant's age is unknown but is predicted to be between twenty-five and thirty-five. Seven participants identified as heterosexual and the sexual orientation of one participant is unknown.

Participants worked in a variety of contexts, including government agencies or services and within the non-government sector. They worked within a variety of roles and programs with differing focuses and priorities across Tasmania. Many also had experience working in other Australian states and drew on these experiences. Prior to meeting with participants, I also approached three of my friends of refugee background who I had previously had discussions about Whiteness with. I invited these friends to be part of a critical reference group, who I referred to as critical friends. I met with this group four times throughout the project. I shared with them details of the method and methodology, data analysis, and heard their voices. My relationships with my critical friends are genuine relationships and they are ongoing. Our formal meetings were co-created, and they honoured our connections to each other. I believe that the generosity of my critical friends who graciously shared with me their understandings of Whiteness assisted me in my own understanding of how Whiteness operates and how I made meaning of the data.

The approach of using multiple sources of data, otherwise known as the process of triangulation, enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the research. As explained by Cope (2014, p. 90) utilising multiple methods, including interviews and focus groups help the researcher to 'gain an articulate, comprehensive view of the phenomenon'. First, participants engaged in a one-on-one semi-structured interview to start relationship building and begin conversations about Whiteness. They were then provided with four readings and two video resources about Whiteness. The rationale behind this was to help participants increase their understanding of Whiteness and how it operates and manifests, to

familiarise them with discussions about Whiteness and race, whilst also providing a vocabulary for our future discussions. Two focus groups followed two to three months later, enabling me to gain data on participants' interpretations of Whiteness. These also provided participants a peer support opportunity. Each participant attended one focus group. One to three months later, participants then attended one-on-one semi-structured interviews to deconstruct and reconstruct practice examples and day-to-day routines. This method was informed by the work of [Morley \(2008\)](#) who used critical reflection as a method in her research. Participants then provided optional evaluations.

Data were analysed using narrative analysis, focusing on stories to gain insight into how people interpret the world ([Fraser and MacDougall, 2017](#)). Interview questions promoted storytelling focused on previous and current practice, leading to the collection of data appropriate for narrative analysis. The analysis was informed by [Fraser's \(2004\)](#) approach to narrative analysis, which adopted a critical social work approach. This approach outlines seven phases of conducting an analysis of stories. These phases are offered as 'overlapping and un-sequential' (p. 186), and 666 stories were identified across interview and focus group data.

When presenting the research findings, 'people of refugee background' will be used to refer to people who are resettling in Australia through the humanitarian program, and also people with a current asylum-seeking status. This is because they were predominantly discussed interchangeably by participants.

## Findings and discussion

This section presents findings as well as a discussion and analysis. Stories and quotes are not connected to specific participants. This is to ensure the anonymity of the small Tasmanian social work community.

### Organisational contexts

#### *Organisational climate and culture*

Several participants discussed workplace climate and culture in relation to the operationalisation of Whiteness. [Kendall \(2013\)](#) defines organisational climate as including 'the organization's history, its employee composition, ways of doing things, formal and informal rules, [and] leadership style' (p. 167).

One participant discussed how organisational climate in their office caused them discomfort in relation to leadership style and with some of the ‘rules’ or ‘ways of doing things’ within the organisation. This is illustrated in the following quote relating to practice with clients as they resettle:

And from the leadership side of things, there’s no talk about being empathetic or understanding or respectful. Or culturally aware, there’s no talk of that. There’s only ‘be firm with your clients, be assertive’. And, so there’s very little talk about, listening to them and respecting them. There’s lots of talk about ‘they must respect how we do things’ and if they speak up and, challenge they’re quite often labelled as, like a narrative in the team mostly from the top, is: ‘Oh geez that’s a troublesome family, or that’s a tricky family’.

The impact or influence that management has on workplace climate was also discussed by a participant, where the beliefs and attitudes of those in leadership positions created a workplace failing to reach its full potential. For another participant, they discussed feeling as though their workplace was becoming increasingly policy-driven, impacting their ability to work appropriately with people of refugee background.

Participants interpreting Whiteness as operating through the climate of organisations where they work appears to have been influenced by the organisation’s history and previous ways of doing things, as well as leadership styles and managements’ decision-making. This was interpreted as leading to institutional and covert racism and bureaucratisation, influencing social work with people of refugee background. Bureaucratisation, theorised by Max Weber, is the result of what [Chenoweth and McAuliffe \(2017\)](#) describe as organisations being ‘based on power, domination and authority’, characterised as ‘large, impersonal, hierarchical, rule-orientated and rigid’ (p. 221). There appears to be a lack of discussion in the literature about the impact of organisational climates and the connection to institutional and covert racism. However, several studies, for example, [Waxman \(1998\)](#), [Nipperess \(2013\)](#), [Baltra-Ulloa \(2014\)](#), [Robinson \(2014\)](#) and [Jewson \*et al.\* \(2015\)](#) discussed bureaucracy and rigidity within organisations as restricting workers’ abilities to work appropriately with refugee arrived clients.

To understand an organisation’s culture, is to understand the ‘why’ of functions within organisations ([Kendall, 2013](#)). Many participants mentioned observing that White people are those who predominantly get employed. One participant also mentioned noticing that when non-White people do get employed, it is often in positions considered to be lower down the hierarchy of power, also related to skills and qualifications obtained in other countries not being recognised in Australia. The skill-sets most privileged within organisations were also discussed by several participants. These included being computer literate, having good written

and verbal English, having knowledge about how Australian systems work and the ability to stick to the dominant Western way of approaching time and appointments. For participants, this noticing of White people was not simply White people being more visible but having decision-making power.

Whilst discussing institutional racism, Sue (2006) argued that White people often get hired or promoted due to the cultural behaviours that are considered most valuable or desirable within White supremacist societies. Therefore, whilst the hiring of White people may seem fair due to meeting the set criteria, the criteria are likely based on White cultural behaviours. The hiring practices discussed by participants in this project could also be partially explained by exploring in-group preferencing. For example, Walter *et al.* (2013) when discussing the White habitus; a framework they elaborate to conceptualise Whiteness, argue that Whites are socialised to prefer the company of our in-group and have 'negative views of non-Whites' (p. 233).

#### *How physical spaces are constructed*

Several of the participants provided examples of how Whiteness manifests via the construction of physical spaces within organisations. Participants noted that physical spaces are set up to best accommodate White Euro-Australian clients. For example, one participant emphasises how the two to three people in a room, sitting face-to-face set up of counselling spaces, whilst seemingly natural and comfortable for White Euro-Australians, was perceived very differently by social work clients from refugee arrived communities who she discussed her counselling spaces with:

And every single one of them said that they would feel like they were being interrogated. So not supported, not given an opportunity but that they were being interrogated because, the person with authority is asking me questions and in the country I come from, that could be really dangerous for me.

In conversation with my critical friends, we discussed the analysis of Whiteness manifesting through the construction of physical spaces. They affirmed this as Whiteness, with one sharing their own experiences of how community practices within hospitals had been restricted in Australia due to the construction of physical spaces.

Whiteness as manifested through the construction of physical spaces within organisations can be explained through the work of Bonam *et al.* (2017). Exploring physical space through the lens of psychology, they argue that physical spaces, including built environments, are racialised spaces and cultural products. Further, they argue that 'race *is* because policies, practices, laws, and institutions have used physical space to both craft racial

group boundaries and reinforce racial privilege and disadvantage' (p. 3, emphasis in original). Applying this argument, it is concluded that physical social work spaces have been constructed as White spaces that privilege Euro-Australian clients and provide comfort to Euro-Australian workers.

In the second interview, the abovementioned participant shared how her organisation had begun changing the way that they worked with people from refugee-arrived communities, detailed in the following quote:

But these women want some other people with them not just one person whatever, so that they feel it's a safe conversation. And so, changing the way that I set up an interview room or changing the way that I have that one-to-one interview conversation might be, that's more forward in my mind now. 'What is it that you want out of this and how can we accommodate that?'. And when I have the conversation with some of the women from different backgrounds, I'll say to them: 'How do you want the room set up?' Well one of the things is around, halal food. We don't normally offer any food when we have interviews with people. But, it's culturally appropriate for some, in some spaces rather than just saying 'do you want a coffee?'. So, saying to the workers here also that 'if you have somebody use this space, then asking them how they would be comfortable, rather than meeting face-to-face across a room, and you tell me what you need'.

In this example, physical spaces in the organisation had previously been constructed as White Euro-Australian spaces. Reconstructing physical spaces was a way of speaking back to Whiteness. The participant also emphasised the importance of dialogue and being in relationships as fundamental to the success of having clients engage with the service and as a way to unsettle the operationalisation of Whiteness.

## Organisational practices

### *One-size fits all*

Many of the barriers that participants believed clients of refugee background experience when accessing culturally appropriate social work services related to one-size fits all approaches. Services offered only in English were frequently discussed as a barrier for clients of refugee background in terms of access. For example, two participants discussed how the dominance of the English language can be a barrier in relation to health literacy. For one, they explained noticing that often people accessing the health system are not talked to in a way that is appropriate for their level of English:

It's very much Whiteness functioning at that level, where, White staff assume everyone should have a good level of English. And if you don't,

bad luck. And that always upsets me and... But to try and convince them otherwise... But I see it as a systemic issue too, like there's really no leadership around that.

The use of English was also a barrier to hearing feedback from clients about services and hearing the voices of all members of groupwork.

The dominance of the Euro-Australian culture in informing how services are delivered was also seen as a barrier to clients of refugee background accessing culturally appropriate services. For example, individualistic approaches to care, the way that consent is obtained and the way that counselling is performed were all mentioned. One participant discussed how their organisation's periods of closure are structured around the holidays celebrated by White Euro-Australians: for example, Easter and Christmas.

The expectations placed on people of refugee background when accessing services was also discussed. For example, expectations that clients will conform to the dominant Western way of doing things. This included that the Monday to Friday, 9 am–5 pm workday will be suitable to clients, that the individualistic way of doing things is expected to be ok and comfortable, that they will want to and be able to come into the office to access services and that they will be 'on time' in relation to the Western way of doing appointments.

The findings above illustrate how participants interpreted Whiteness as operating through the privileging of English and Euro-Australian ways of doing things. These interpretations are supported by literature critically exploring Whiteness, where White ways of doing things are defined as the invisible norm, 'against which all other races and ethnic groups are measured' (Baltra-Ulloa, 2013, p. 95). In response, participants discussed their beliefs that more flexibility in the delivery of services is required in relation to practices with people of refugee background. Robinson (2014) came to similar conclusions, finding that whilst participants did report that they were attracted to Non Government Organisations for having a degree of flexibility to 'engage in innovative work practices', there was still a reported need for more discretion and independence for workers (p. 1613). These findings also echo the work of Baltra-Ulloa (2014), who found that positive social work encounters were reported as focusing on relationships, reciprocity and mutual learning. In other words, those that were guided by clients and their wants and needs, not those where one-size-fits-all approaches designed to cater for the dominant group.

### *New, covert and overt racism*

Examples of new, covert and overt racism were discussed by several participants. New racism is the covert and nuanced ways that people are discriminated against, where the focus is placed on culture, rather than race

(Pon, 2009). An example given by one participant of new racism occurring within the hospital setting is provided below:

A Muslim family I was working with were expecting a baby, and they were very adamant that they wanted female health professionals involved in the birth. So, I had told them that we would do what we could to try and get female staff... Ah, so I got this phone call from the father, he said '(name), come here now, I'm on the maternity unit, they're refusing to listen to us, because we're asking...' they were asking for a female health professional... I went to speak to the doctors, and there was one doctor there, who in a very loud voice to other doctors, the patient thankfully and her partner weren't there, said in a very loud voice to the other doctors: 'How dare this family, ask for a female health professional. What right do they have to do that?'

This example is similar to narratives reported by Dalikeni (2021), where social workers took issue with the child-rearing practices of African clients due to cultural differences.

Covert racism was also discussed by participants, defined as indirect discrimination that 'operates beneath the surface' (Okitiki and Aymer, 2003, p. 1). According to Sue *et al.* (2008), one of the tenets of covert racism is that it is hard to prove as racism, as perpetrators may be unaware of the motivations of their actions; thus, alternative explanations are frequently produced. In this study, one participant explained that it is considered 'normal' for White people to wait less time at Centrelink, and for the African-Australian family in the waiting room to be watched more closely by the security guards. Another also explained noticing covert racism when they see a non-White patient in the hospital not getting offered an interpreter or not being referred to the social worker.

Several of the workers also reported witnessing overt racism within organisations. This included the overt racism of other workers and also clients towards non-White workers. Many participants had experiences of observing other White people treating people whose first language is not English as if they are either deaf, inferior or of lower intelligence. An example of overt racism towards a client of refugee background that was witnessed by a participant working within the hospital setting helps demonstrate this theme:

I was working with a (ethnic group) patient, and they believe that, if breast milk from the woman fell in the cooking pot when they went home, that everyone in the family would die. And I just said to the person, I said 'wow that's incredible, I didn't know that about your culture, thank you so much for sharing that story with me'. And then I shared that, what had been told to me with one of the treating doctors and the doctor said: 'Well did you tell them they're stupid, and that they shouldn't believe such rubbish?'

The current findings relate to those of [Robinson \(2014\)](#), where half of the research participants were of refugee background. Workers experienced ‘racist taunts and attacks’ (p. 1611) towards both themselves and clients of refugee background. Similarly, [Jewson \*et al.\* \(2015\)](#) reported that service providers supporting clients of refugee background in Australia observed prejudice and racism occurring within the service sector.

## Participants’ discomfort

Several participants explicitly mentioned feeling uncomfortable about things that had occurred or may still be occurring within organisations. Most commonly, participants discussed feeling discomfort related to the behaviour of colleagues and/or the actions of management. In one example, a participant explained that:

I’ve spoken up about that a few times in a meeting and there’s not much room for the workers to speak up, and you feel like a rebel for speaking up, between the workers and the leadership, and even a few of the other workers unfortunately, like if you speak up your causing too much trouble and... you’re made to feel a bit naive like [impersonating]: ‘Oh you don’t understand how it works, that’s not how it works’.

For some participants, they reported not having spoken up to challenge management or colleagues because they either did not know what to do or say or did not feel safe to speak up. For participants who worked or have worked within the health sphere, some also mentioned feeling that medical staff had more power than them and thus, they did not feel like they could speak up. These findings mirror those of [Case \(2012\)](#), who interviewed White women about their experiences of Whiteness. These women also reported not speaking up due to power differentials and not feeling safe to due to possible future repercussions. These collective findings suggest that there are multiple reasons why people may be reluctant to speak up, including being made to feel like they don’t understand how things are done and feeling unsafe to challenge certain workers. [Sue \(2017, p. 711\)](#), in his article exploring the challenges that can be experienced by White allies, argued that White people who learn about Whiteness and want to be allies are often ill-prepared to be someone that ‘walks the talk’.

[McIntyre \(1997\)](#), conducting research with fellow White women teachers to explore Whiteness, argued that being anti-racist and attempts to disrupt Whiteness were privileged choices. That is, McIntyre found that addressing racism (or not) was related to convenience that she argued, is only an option that White people have, given that being White results in the absence of racial oppression and discrimination. In the first meeting

with my critical friends about the project, this convenience to think about race and take action was discussed as common behaviour of White people. The wording used in the group was ‘when it comes to Whiteness, White people can pick it up and put it down’, an option not afforded to non-Whites.

Therefore, these are examples of how social workers can collude in affirming White supremacy when we fail to respond in ways that challenge Whiteness affirming practices.

## Study limitations and ethical considerations

Given the power imbalances that occur within relationships between clients and social workers generally, making the claim that the examples participants provided are related to race can pose challenges and could be considered a study limitation. However, consistently throughout all interviews and focus groups, the focused remained on issues of race and White power and privilege in relation to a White profession and White social workers working with non-White clients.

This research included eight participants. Whilst each participant meeting with me three times enabled the collection of sufficient research data, I recognise that this is a small sample size. Therefore, the research findings are specific to the time and place within which they occurred.

A possible ethical consideration is that I am a White person, who met with White people to talk about Whiteness. I also analysed the data. As mentioned earlier, I met with my critical friends throughout the project. I shared with them details of the method and methodology, of data analysis, and heard their voices. In addition, my supervisors regularly gave feedback and guidance around the operationalisation and manifestation of Whiteness. Further, we discussed step-by-step my data analysis to ensure transparency and accountability. I also kept reflective journal where I interrogated my own Whiteness regularly.

## Implications for social work practice, thinking and education

For participants in this study, Whiteness manifested and was operationalised in practice with people of refugee background through the dominance of White Western approaches. Participants also highlighted that this limited their capacity for practice to be responsive to the needs of clients of refugee background. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting how inflexible and rigid systems fail to meet the needs of clients of refugee background (Waxman, 1998; Century *et al.*, 2007; Baltra-Ulloa, 2014; Farley *et al.*, 2014; Robinson, 2014;

Jewson *et al.*, 2015). As discussed earlier, literature exploring practice experiences with this cohort suggests that encounters focused on relationships, reciprocity and mutual learning and client's meaningful engagement are those deemed as positive social work encounters (Russell and White, 2001; Baltra-Ulloa, 2014; Larkin and Lefevre, 2020). However, the findings illustrate how, from the perspective of participants, this is not the focus of many organisations and/or workers.

Together, these sets of findings suggest that social workers in all positions need to be actively advocating for flexible approaches to the construction of organisational contexts and practices. This could be achieved through social workers playing a more active role in influencing laws, policies, funding agreements and organisational practices in ways that speak back to Whiteness. However, given that social work in Australia is predominantly a White Western profession, this also raises questions about how willing some social workers will be to change and unlearn our ways of knowing, being and doing, given that dominant groups have an investment and comfort in maintaining the status-quo (Pease, 2010).

It was observed that when participants told stories of being aware of Whiteness, they often also reported having not spoken out to challenge it. Therefore, Whiteness also operated through complicity with, and the affirmation of Whiteness in practice. These findings are consistent with previous research where other White people have reported not speaking up to challenge Whiteness (Case, 2012). It is therefore recommended that White social workers implement strategies to ensure we do speak up about the operationalisation of Whiteness, regardless of perceived barriers and consequences.

The ways in which participants' understandings of Whiteness developed over the course of the study was not included in the analysis. However, many participants understood Whiteness when entering the study, and some discussed increased racial consciousness as a result of their involvement in the study. The findings therefore suggest that knowing about and learning about Whiteness and then wanting to make change are not necessarily enough to ensure that White people will not enact, reinforce and be complicit in Whiteness. This finding is consistent with other scholars who have highlighted that raised racial consciousness does not guarantee that White people will disrupt Whiteness (for example, Cunningham, 1993; Lopes and Thomas, 2006; Curry-Stevens, 2007). Therefore, the promotion of service delivery models which are refugee-led and/or staffed organisations, or who utilise accountability practices may be more appropriate than relying on White people. In recent years, studies in the USA have explored the potential of culturally specific organisations and their success in supporting clients of colour (for example, see Curry-Stevens and Muthanna, 2016; Curry-Stevens, 2018; Curry-Stevens *et al.*, 2019). Curry-Stevens *et al.* (2019) explain that such organisations can offer more culturally specific and appropriate services, which have been found to lead to client benefits.

As explained by [Prehn \(2019\)](#) in the Australian context, this kind of service delivery approach has also been successful in meeting the needs of Australian Aboriginal communities and groups for some time. For example, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) have been found to increase accessibility and promote culturally safe and appropriate care that is responsive to the holistic view of health in comparison to mainstream services ([Gomersall et al., 2017](#)).

## Conclusions

The findings of this research offer insight into how White social workers experience the manifestations and operationalisation of Whiteness within organisations working with people of refugee background. It is argued that there is a need for flexible and relational approaches to practice and for social workers to be involved in decision-making that explores alternatives to the dominant approaches to supporting communities as they resettle. Social workers and organisations also need to explore strategies to ensure they speak up to challenge Whiteness and resist affirming or being complicit in Whiteness. However, programs and service delivery models which are refugee-led and/or staffed organisations, or who utilise accountability practices may be the best way to guarantee culturally appropriate services.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support, knowledge and guidance of my PhD supervisor's Dr Ann Joselynn (Jos) Baltra-Ulloa and Professor Bob Pease. I would also like to thank my critical friends, whose interest in and support of this project, and invaluable insight and input made my PhD project what it became.

## Funding

This work was funded by the Australian Government's Research Training Program scholarship.

*Conflict of interest statement.* None declared.

## Ethical approval

The current research was approved by the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number H0016010.

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