

Membership categorization analysis of racism in an online discussion among neighbors

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses relationships between micro and macro aspects of language use through analyzing online interactions among neighbors discussing racism in their neighborhood. Membership categorization analysis supplemented with critical theory highlights how the ways neighbors name, characterize, and position categories orients to their rhetorical and identity goals (to construct reasonable stances, to seem not racist), which in turn motivates alignment with critical, folk, or colorblind ideologies of racism. Thus, ideologies do not determine interactional choices participants make, but rather are constituted by those choices. Findings also illustrate how discursive strategies such as reported speech, absurdity, three-part lists, and metadiscourse support ways that neighbors organize categories and achieve their aims. Additional contributions to this study include demonstrating the utility of membership categorization analysis for analyzing discourses of racism and providing practical insight into how racially diverse groups can have productive conversations about racism. (Racism, ideology, membership categorization analysis)*

INTRODUCTION

The field of language and social interaction (LSI) generally agrees that analysis should closely focus on the particulars of language use (micro), but there is debate about how to connect analysis of language use to macro forms of social organization (Schegloff 1987; Billig 1999; Tracy 1999; Kitzinger 2000; Maheux-Pelletier & Golato 2008). Some argue analysts should illustrate how participants orient to the macro through their language use. Conversation analysts focus on how sequence of conversational actions displays participants' orientation to maintaining interaction order (Schegloff 1987), discourse analysts show how language use displays participants' orientation to preserving valued identities (Tracy 1990), and ethnographers of communication illustrate how participants orient to everyday conversation as aligning with culturally valued ways of speaking (Carbaugh 2005). Critical discourse analysts (van Dijk 1998; Billig 1999; Wodak & Meyer 2009; Fairclough 2013) argue these approaches minimize the role that language use

plays in social inequality. Participants often do not display awareness about social inequality shaping language use nor would they agree with the analyst's characterization of a conversation as 'racist', for example. Thus, studies should foreground analysts' concerns (i.e. about racist language) and reveal ways that seemingly neutral language use can perpetuate social inequalities.

This article argues that analyses of participants' immediate interactional and identity concerns and analyses of analysts' concerns for studying social inequality are not divergent but require one another to produce a better understanding of language in society. This article illustrates that participants' orientation to rhetorical and identity goals motivates their alignment with different ideologies. Ideologies do not determine interactional choices participants make, but rather are constituted by those choices. To support this argument, I analyze online forum data where neighbors discuss racism occurring in their neighborhood.

THEORIZING RACE AND RACISM IN EVERYDAY LANGUAGE USE

Critical race theorists argue that race is a product of histories of inequalities among racial groups, where whiteness is hegemonic (e.g. taken-for-granted, normal, dominant) and minority groups are racialized and excluded from the privileges of whiteness (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas 1995; Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Hill 2008; Griffin 2010; Omi & Winant 2014; Alim, Rickford, & Ball 2016; Rosa & Flores 2017; Flores 2018). Although many people believe that racism is over and that race is no longer a relevant identity, critical race theory (CRT) argues that racial inequalities are so deeply embedded in 'everyday, political, cultural, and legal thought as a "natural" fact that its manifestations have become largely invisible' (Flores 2018:379). Therefore, the goal of critical race scholarship is to expose 'the ordinariness of racism as a daily experience' (378–79) both through critiquing practices that uphold the hegemonic status of whiteness and through foregrounding practices, particularly of minority groups, that question status quo racial hierarchies. LSI research contributes to CRT aims through pinpointing interactionally specific ways that participants orient to race and racism, thus making visible the ordinariness of racism in everyday language use.

Discursive practices that uphold status quo racial inequality include taking stances that minimize racism (e.g. denying prejudice, normalizing self-segregation) (van den Berg, Wetherell, & Houtkoop-Steenstra 2003; Whitehead & Wittig 2004; Foster 2009; Bucholtz 2010; Sambaraju, McVittie, Goodall, & McKinlay 2017). In addition, participants indirectly negatively evaluate minority groups through reproducing cultural models when constructing racial minority identities (e.g. constructing black men as dangerous) (van Dijk 1993; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Gaudio & Bialostok 2005; Tileaga 2005; Bucholtz 2011; Jones 2016) or through negatively evaluating racial minority dialects, accents, and/or languages (Urciuoli 1996; Lippi-Green 1997; Zentella 1997; Barrett 2006; Blackledge 2006; Hill 2008;

Subtirelu 2015; Collins 2017). These discursive strategies allow participants to negatively evaluate racial minority groups while still meeting their identity goals to be not racist and their rhetorical goals to construct reasonable stances (Augoustinos & Every 2007).

These strategies do not solely meet interactionally specific identity and rhetorical aims, but also serve ideological functions that in turn contribute to upholding structural inequalities (Wetherell & Potter 1992; van Dijk 1998; Fairclough 2013). Ideologies are socially shared beliefs that ‘form the basis of specific arguments for, and explanations of, specific social arrangements’, like racism (van Dijk 1998:8). Through aligning with different ideologies about racism, participants’ interactions perpetuate common-sense understandings about racism, which can serve to uphold or challenge status quo racial hierarchies.

The above strategies align with folk ideology of racism (Hill 2008) and/or colorblind racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2003). The folk ideology of racism holds that ‘racism is entirely a matter of individual beliefs, intentions, and actions’ (Hill 2008:6). According to folk ideology, a person is racist if they believe that any racial group is inferior to another racial group, voice these opinions, and intend to be racist when doing so. Folk ideology holds that racism is no longer a problem save a few individual exceptions. Thus, folk ideology excuses many of the ways people negatively evaluate minority groups as not racist because they are said by well-intentioned people. Whereas folk ideology denies racial inequality through orienting to racism as individual aberrations from an otherwise equal society, colorblind racial ideology ‘explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics’ (Bonilla-Silva 2003:2). Instead of orienting to racial inequalities as evidence of racism, interactions that align with colorblind ideology explain inequalities in terms of individual failures (i.e. not working hard enough) or cultural preferences (i.e. x group prefers to group together). Through ignoring structural inequality and/or explaining it away in non-racial terms, discourses aligning with folk or colorblind ideologies of racism maintain status quo racial inequality.

Other LSI studies document some practices used to highlight the ordinary, often ignored, instances of racism faced by minority groups. These strategies include reported speech—where participants quote someone and take stances towards this quote as an instance of racism (Buttny 1997; Stokoe & Edwards 2007), extreme case reformulations to call out racist utterances (Robles 2015), and overt explanations of racial inequality to audiences who may not be aware about the pervasiveness of racism (Urciuoli 2009; Hodges 2015; Shrikant & Musselwhite 2018). Participants’ rhetorical aims in these studies include constructing reasonable, believable stances that racism does exist or to manage the dilemma of acknowledging racism while avoiding face-threats. In addition, many LSI studies analyzing how racial minorities interact within our own communities highlight how racial minority groups orient to race as an identity that provides a sense of community in contexts of racial inequality. Practices such as codeswitching, person-referencing, or

displaying knowledge about cultural practices (Lo 1999; Bailey 2001; Shrikant 2015, 2018; Mendoza-Denton 2014) index shared identity, and participants evaluate the authenticity of other members' use of these practices. Participants in many of these studies discuss how they construct their own minority identities for purposes of distancing themselves from white identity, in part, because of racism they experienced. Across these studies, minorities construct individual racist experiences as examples of, and not aberrations from, the norm.

Through acknowledging that racism as an ordinary phenomenon or orienting to race as an identity tied to ways communities include or exclude one another, the strategies above align with critical racial ideology (Hill 2008; Hodges 2015). Critical ideology of racism holds that racism 'is a cultural phenomenon that exists in publicly circulating discourses' (Hill 2008:18). In other words, racism is not about individual intentions but about how common-sense ways of talking and acting reproduce inequalities between White and minority racial groups. In contrast to folk ideology that positions the individual as the potential racist, talk reflecting critical ideology orients to racism as inequality among groups that are produced by institutional and political norms and positions individual actions as part of this larger process. Critical ideology holds that racism is ongoing and often occurs in implicit, routine ways and that people across races should be reflective about how their everyday practices are embedded in and can perpetuate status quo racial inequality. Although many people are aware of, and do speak from, a critical racial ideology perspective, this ideology is not hegemonic—invisible, taken-for-granted, neutral—like folk or colorblind ideologies (Hill 2008; Hodges 2015).

The above synthesis highlights how discursive strategies align with differing ideologies of racism, yet very few studies analyze interactions where participants voice these differing strategies and/or ideologies in response to one another. The studies that have done so analyze news interviews (Hodges 2015) or online anonymous interactions (Cresswell, Whitehead, & Durrheim 2014) where conflict is expected and encouraged. The current article analyzes interactions among neighbors, where participants know one another, share an offline space, and have goals for maintaining friendly relationships with one another. This article highlights discursive strategies participants use when constructing stances about racism and illustrates how these stances reproduce, negotiate, or challenge ideologies of racism.

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIZATION ANALYSIS, RACE, AND RACISM

This article uses membership categorization analysis (MCA) (Sacks 1972, 1989; Hester & Eglin 1997; Stokoe 2012; Fitzgerald & Housley 2015) to analyze how participants display an orientation to race or racism. Through conducting MCA, this article highlights how participants display 'presumed common-sense

knowledge of social structures', like racism, through the ways they use, characterize, and organize different identity categories (Hester & Eglin 1997:3).

Membership categories are classifications that participants use to reference and describe people (e.g. 'white', 'person of color', 'neighbor'). There are multiple accurate membership categories for a person, and people choose a category that is most relevant to a context or most directly meets their aims (Stokoe 2012). The categories participants choose index larger collections, or membership categorization devices, of which a category is a part, like 'race' (Sacks 1989). Participants display knowledge about racism through category-tied predicates, where they describe a category, and category-bound activities, where they link activities with categories (Stokoe 2012). For example, when a participant says, "white people believe the neighborhood is diverse but do not reach out to minorities", the category is "white people", a predicate is "believe the neighborhood is diverse", and the activity is "do not reach out to minorities". Similar to previous studies using MCA to study race, this article illustrates how participants' choice of categories are resources for conversational actions such as making an argument or opposing a previous assertion (Hansen 2005; Stokoe & Edwards 2007; Whitehead & Lerner 2009; Hansen & Milburn 2015; Shrikant 2018, 2020).

This article supplements MCA with more critically oriented LSI approaches to show how neighbors' interactions perform ideological functions (Wetherell & Potter 1992; van Dijk 1998; Fairclough 2013). The current analysis traces how participants' discursive strategies reproduce, negotiate, or challenge folk, colorblind, and/or critical ideologies of racism. For example, if a neighbor says, "I'm sorry that woman was racist", they use the membership category "woman" and the category-tied predicate "racist". This neighbor discusses racism as something committed by an individual racist person, thus aligning with folk ideology. By contrast, if a neighbor says, "Parents of color have been historically targeted", they use the category "parents of color" and the predicate "have been historically targeted". The category "parents of color" and the category bound activity "targeted" (which applies to white or institutional categories) both index the device of race in the US, with "targeted" indexing repeated discrimination of minority groups. This neighbor, through foregrounding systemic, historical inequalities among groups, is aligning with critical racial ideology.

DATA AND CONTEXT

The publicly available data analyzed includes fifty-one posts from thirty neighbors over an eight-day period (December 2–9, 2010). I became acquainted with this data when participating as part of a research group studying how online interactional practices can promote higher quality civic engagement (Murray, Woolf, Xu, Shipe, Howard, & Wing 2012). The data is publicly available on the platform e-democracy.org.¹ Offline, geographically bounded communities can use e-democracy.org to promote community engagement. The platform allows for asynchronous

communication: participants email one another and are not using a synchronous chat. The emails are also available as a full thread on the site. Each thread has a title, which in this case is, ‘On trying to love my neighborhood... and not succeeding’. The title and first post plays a role in setting the goals of and parameters for discussion (addressing racism, particularly as it occurs in this neighborhood). This platform also includes only typed contributions where participants convey meaning through word choice instead of nonverbal cues, gifs, or emoticons. Participants’ interactions overtly make relevant their offline relationships and their identities as Powderhorn Park residents. Participants also comment on the online nature of their interactions about racism and discuss other, complimentary, offline social practices they can use to address racism in their neighborhood.

These interactions also take place within broader contexts of race and racism in the United States. Race is a form of social organization foundational to the United States (Omi & Winant 2014). Race started for purposes of justifying slave labor, where wealthy White Europeans exploited Native American lands and built their own wealth from the labor of African slaves. Over the years, various waves of immigrants arrived in the US, and each group was subsequently racialized into White or non-White groups, with social, economic, and political privileges reserved for White people (Hill 2008). The neighborhood where the participants reside, Powderhorn Park, located outside of Minneapolis, Minnesota has a history of problematic race relations. Perhaps the most overt evidence of racism in this neighborhood are recent events where the police murdered George Floyd, an African American male, in this very neighborhood. Floyd’s murder caused protests across the US and internationally about racism, particularly as it affects African American individuals (Almasy, Yan, & Holcombe 2020; Hill, Tiefenthäler, Triebert, Jordan, Willis, & Stein 2020). Although the data analyzed here occurred ten years before Floyd’s murder, organizers and writers like Miski Noor² note that racism has long been pervasive in Powderhorn, and Minneapolis more generally.

At the time of these posts (2010), the racial demographics for this neighborhood was 44% White, 32% Hispanic or Latino, 14% Black or African American, 5% two or more races/other race, 3% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 2% Asian or Pacific Islander.³ This neighborhood publicly presents itself having a strong sense of community: they have an active neighborhood association with an updated website and a community project called Powderhorn365, which documents the lives of residents each year via pictures.⁴ These websites advocate for building an inclusive community and overtly value diversity. Neighbors in this data orient ‘white’ and ‘neighbors of color’ as relevant identities when discussing if and how racism occurs in their neighborhood. Many posts discuss how, even though the neighborhood espouses ideals of diversity and inclusion, it is not a place where racial minorities feel included.

FINDINGS

Analysis of this relatively small set of data supports this article's broader theoretical and methodological argument about connecting micro and macro aspects of language use. The examples analyzed below include posts where neighbors use different discursive strategies (micro) to achieve a variety of identity and rhetorical goals (macro). Participants' choices, in turn, reproduce, negotiate, or challenge different ideologies of racism (macro). Posts below were cut and paste directly from the forum. Focal points of analysis are underlined.

Raced and nonraced devices

The following analysis illustrates how Shannon, an African American mother, makes relevant the devices of family and race when discussing experiences of racism in the neighborhood. Shannon aligns with critical ideology of racism through positioning her experiences as examples of broader social inequalities among racial groups. Analysis of responses to Shannon's post position family as a nonraced device and Shannon's experiences as an aberration from an otherwise accepting neighborhood, thus aligning with colorblind and folk ideologies of racism.

Shannon narrates how she and her family (her husband and baby) attended an outdoor neighborhood community event in the winter in Minnesota. It was very cold outside, and although Shannon's baby was "wrapped in two layers of clothing, a thick down coat... a thick blanket... and a hat", the baby managed to kick off his clothes. Shannon then narrates how an "older white lady" reprimanded Shannon's husband, Ballah, about the baby's lack of clothing. Through narrating an experience of racism at a neighborhood community event, Shannon supports the argument of her broader post: that the neighborhood is not as accepting as many white neighbors perceive it to be.

(1) Shannon, Dec. 2, 2010, 11:37pm

- 1 This older white lady tells Ballah, 'Why are your baby's stomach and legs uncovered?'
- 2 Ballah was leaning in, trying to hear her, as the horns were playing loudly around us, and
- 3 he is still picking up peoples' accents here. But I heard this woman loud and clear. The
- 4 lady repeated herself again, and said, 'This seems like negligent parenting to me.' Ballah
- 5 hadn't heard her, but I did, and struggled to contain my anger, and with the best way to
- 6 respond. 'Why would you say that?' I asked her. 'Well, his stomach and legs are
- 7 exposed,' she said. 'That's not what I mean,' I said. 'Why would you say something about
- 8 negligent parenting? Why wouldn't you just say, 'I'm not sure if you noticed, but your
- 9 child's stomach and legs aren't covered.' She shrugged for a moment, and then
- 10 responded, 'I guess because I'm judgmental.' 'You might want to do something about
- 11 that,' I told her, and then we walked away.
- 12 Don't get me wrong, I still would definitely be pissed if this were an isolated incident.
- 13 And I am well aware that my friends of all ethnic and racial persuasions sometimes get
- 14 hounded and judged by the general public, and ornery white people in particular, but there

15 is a kind of accumulated experience along these lines for my family these past few weeks
 16 that feels disturbingly like targeting. This, coupled with the hard data I am aware of,
 17 documenting the hyper-visibility, vigilance, and surveillance of parents of color—
 18 particularly Black and Native families in this state—which partially leads to our
 19 increased incidence of out-of-home placement, termination of parental rights, and general
 20 exposure to the child welfare system, makes me particularly sensitive to these kinds of
 21 occurrences.

Shannon constructs a relationship between her family and the category, “older white lady”. Through using a three-part list to construct this woman’s identity, Shannon constructs gender (“lady”) as intersecting with age and race (“older, white”) (Jefferson 1991; Shrikant 2014; Dori-Hacohen 2020), thus creating a familiar judgmental racist woman character. Shannon uses reported speech, where she reconstructs past conversations through quoting herself and the “older white lady” (lines 1–11). Reported speech is often used in narrative accounts about race and racism to assess someone’s behavior as racist (Buttny 1997). Shannon voices “the lady” as accusing Shannon and her husband of “negligent parenting”, and displays her own stance of anger towards this accusation.

Shannon shifts from membership categories referencing specific individuals to categories referencing groups, which connects her personal experiences to political discussions of social inequalities among racial groups. For example, Shannon talks about her experience with the “older white lady” as similar to people of “all ethnic and racial persuasions” “getting hounded” by “ornery white people” (lines 13–14). Shannon adjusts her three-part list from “older white lady” to “ornery white people”. Doing so expands her discussion to a larger group (“people” instead of just one lady) and makes explicit the judgmental quality of these people through changing “older” to “ornery”. The category, “white”, however, stays the same, thus foregrounding race as central to the identities of the people Shannon negatively assesses in her post.

Shannon also shifts the ways she constructs relationships among these identity categories. Shannon uses the category-bound activity “targeting”, often used in reference to the persistent mistreatment of marginalized groups by groups in power, and discusses social and political outcomes for marginalized groups because of this targeting. Shannon supports her argument through adding other category-bound activities, “hyper-visibility, vigilance, and surveillance”, to explain experiences of marginalized groups and through naming the categories “parents of color” and “Black and Native families” (lines 17–18). Overall, Shannon constructs “white” and “people of color” as positioned categories, “collections of categories occupy a hierarchical relationship” (Stokoe 2012:281), where the white category occupies the position of policing people of color. The way Shannon positions categories aligns with broader systemic inequalities in the US where White people police the behavior of Black and African American people (e.g. Herron 2018).⁵ Shannon connects the broader pattern of targeting parents of color to her personal experience as a parent of color accused of negligent parenting by a white woman

(lines 20–21). Shannon’s construction of her personal experiences as being a part of a larger pattern of inequality aligns with critical ideology of racism. Below are responses from Shannon’s neighbors, who reformulate Shannon’s post as being primarily about personal experiences and ignore the points Shannon made about racism as a social concern for all people of color.

(2) Christi, Dec. 2, 2010, 11:59pm

1 I’m so sorry that you are having this experience, especially in a neighborhood that prides
 2 itself on diversity. Thank you for sharing here so people can be more aware that this is
 3 still happening.

(3) Kevin, Dec. 3, 2010, 12:50am

4 Ditto from me too! Glad you were able to bring out your family. Always hard on a cold
 5 night with young children.

(4) Peter, Dec. 3, 2010, 3:08am

6 The woman was wrong in expressing her view of you in these hurtful words. While I
 7 appreciate it when others tell me if they observe something bothering with my children, I
 8 don’t want to be told how I should respond to it – thank you very much. Some people,
 9 however, seem bent to apply their personal notion of how far away I can be from my
 10 children when we walk on the Greenway (while seeing each other) or how close I have to
 11 be to one child while taking care of the other. I wish those people would mind their own
 12 business.

Whereas Shannon positions her experience as an example of a norm, Christi uses a ‘breach formulation’, a discursive move that positions Shannon’s experience as a deviation from the norm, thus questioning Shannon’s point that racism is a problem in this neighborhood (Edwards 1994:211). Christi constructs diversity as a norm for the neighborhood through using the category-tied predicate, “prides itself on diversity”, and positions Shannon’s experience as an individual deviation, using “you” and “this experience”. Christi then discusses remedying racism on an individual level, through constructing neighbors (“people”) as unaware, well-intentioned people who will now “be more aware” that racism is “still happening”. Although Christi does acknowledge there is racism in the neighborhood, her suggestion that awareness will improve the situation reflects the tenet of folk ideology that, if people are more educated, then racism will eventually disappear on its own (Hill 2008). Thus, Christi acknowledges racism, yet minimizes it through discussing racism as individual experiences that can be improved by awareness of well-intentioned individuals.

Whereas Shannon indexes the device of race when discussing her experiences, Kevin indexes the device of a (nonraced) family through using the category-bound activity “bring out” and categories “family” and “young children”. Kevin reproduces colorblind ideology through erasing the relevance of race to the interaction (Bucholtz 2010; Shrikant 2019) and reformulating Shannon’s discussion of racism as a nonraced discussion about parenting. Peter also orients to Shannon’s post as an

individual experience of being judged as a parent instead of an experience of racism. Peter uses categories and category-tied predicates such as “the woman was wrong”, “some people... apply their personal notion” to construct Shannon’s experience as a personal one having to do with judgmental, nonraced people.

Positioning racial categories and resisting them via absurdity

Analysis of the below posts illustrates how another neighbor, Bridget, also uses membership categories in ways that align with critical ideology of race. Responses to Bridget’s post question the way Bridget attributes category-bound activities and predicates to different categories in the device of race, and in doing so, align with folk and colorblind ideology. The primary strategy participants use when opposing Bridget’s points is absurdity (Antaki 2003). Absurdity often involves ‘highly colored, extreme language’ (2003:90) used to oppose an opponent’s point. Participants using absurdity orient to others’ complex arguments as simplistic generalizations and challenge those generalizations or use absurd descriptions when voicing opposing points. Overall, absurdity allows speakers to show ‘that he knows that another view exists. Then he has gone on the attack, as it were, and got his own view across, but his description of the other view has helped his case along nicely’ (2003:96–97).

(5) Bridget, Dec. 4, 2010, 4:24pm

1 Thank you for writing your experience. As a white mother who raised black (mixed race)
 2 sons in Powderhorn, I know what you are talking about. Despite the belief on the part of
 3 the white artsy gardening crowd that Powderhorn is a diverse neighborhood, it is at the
 4 same time a very segregated community. If you looked at the crowd at the vigil, it was
 5 probably 95% white. It was a great vigil, but segregated nonetheless. The whites in
 6 Powderhorn pride themselves on diversity, but few actually mingle with their neighbors
 7 of color. They tend to reach out to the other liberal artsy gardening whites.
 8 I lived in co-op housing right in the heart of Powderhorn surrounded by families of color
 9 for ten years during the ‘90’s. My sons and I participated in all the co-op activities, hung
 10 out at the park regularly (the park staff new us well), always went to the May Day Parade
 11 (even participated a few times, did the art workshops, marched in the parade), attended
 12 regular sporting activities like football, baseball, basketball (I was even a basketball coach
 13 one winter for my kid’s team) and occasionally attended PPNA meetings and park board
 14 meetings. But I knew then what I still see happening now, that people of color and white
 15 women with mixed kids don’t really get included in the artsy-gardening-social worker-
 16 teacher-activist middle class order of the Powderhorn neighborhood.
 17 I once tried to run for the PPNA board but the all white group that showed up for the
 18 election that night just stared at me in disbelief. Naturally they didn’t vote me in...but I
 19 tried.

(6) Doug, Dec. 4, 2010, 4:53pm

20 PPNA has a ‘Community Gatherings’ Committee whose goal is to ‘Build Community
 21 participation, and diverse representation.’ They meet the 3rd Tuesday of each month. We
 22 should all strive to have diverse representation at events and meetings. I have to say I’m

23 confused as to why an all white group on election night wouldn't vote for you, a white
 24 woman to join the board. I challenge all of us to invite the under-represented members of
 25 our community to the next event.
 26 doug
 27 My personal opinion.

(7) Vanessa, Dec. 4, 2010, 5:58pm

28 I am white... also a single mother... I don't have a whole lot of economic power. Love
 29 the parade and the community. I also am not 'artsy' and I don't garden, in fact I have a
 30 black thumb, sorry neighbors about my perpetually ugly yard. Not part of this crowd
 31 you mention, Bridget, not as far as I can tell, but maybe that can't be seen from the
 32 outside. I don't think stereotypes serve anyone well. I find myself bristling at your
 33 characterizations. And although I truly desire not just integration but love for one
 34 another, and I reach out all I can (often to be rebuffed or ignored), at the end of a long
 35 day or night of work I am beaten down by life's demands, and time and energy to do
 36 more escape me.

Bridget constructs an overlap between the devices of family and race through membership categories: “white mother who raised black (mixed race) sons”. Bridget uses her sons’ racial category to align herself with Shannon and families of color. Bridget names the categories “white artsy gardening crowd” (line 3) and positions this in the devices of neighbors and race. Using “liberal artsy gardening” (line 7) implies that these white people are upper class, unlike Bridget’s family, who lived in co-op housing with working class families of color (lines 8–9; class made explicit later: “middle class order”, line 16).

Bridget asserts that white neighbors believe the neighborhood is diverse and then complicates this view through claiming that a “diverse neighborhood” (line 3) can also be “a very segregated community” (line 4). The category “diverse neighborhood” indicates that there are many diverse people in a particular space, whereas “segregated community” highlights the separate, unequal relationships among different race and class groups in this neighborhood. Thus, Bridget organizes “white neighbors” and “neighbors of color” as positioned categories, with white occupying a higher position in the hierarchy. Bridget names category-bound activities that contribute to segregation in the neighborhood: white neighbors do not “mingle with their neighbors of color” and instead “reach out to other liberal artsy gardening whites” (lines 7–8). In other words, white neighbors claim to support diversity while they, because of their race and class privilege, do not need to acknowledge the segregation and its negative effects in the neighborhood. Bridget tells a narrative of personal experience and connects it to structural inequalities (lines 8–16). Similar to Shannon, Bridget draws connections between her personal story (“I knew then what I still see happening now”) to membership categories, predicates, and activities that highlight inequalities among groups (families of color “do not get included” in the social “order” of upper-class white families). Bridget closes through again opposing her own identity with an “all white group” and constructs the category-bound activity of this group “naturally” not “voting” for Bridget.

Doug informs Bridget and the other neighbors about a PPNA committee that focuses on building a diverse community (lines 20–21) and asserts that “we should all” (lines 21–22) try to have diverse representation. By using the pronoun “we”, Doug groups all neighbors together instead of dividing them into unequal subgroups the way Bridget did. Doug uses the category bound activity “should all strive to have diverse representation”, which reformulates Bridget’s assertion that the “white artsy gardening crowd” needs to “reach out” to people of color. Rather, Doug promotes a committee supporting diversity as an obvious, already existing solution to racism and puts the onus of attending these meetings on the minorities who claim to feel excluded. Bridget orients to critical ideology of racism through advocating for groups in power (upper-class white people) as needing to make changes, while Doug orients to colorblind ideology through erasing the relevance of racial inequality when discussing diversity in the neighborhood. Doug uses absurdity when expressing Bridget’s viewpoints (Antaki 2003), which opposes Bridget’s claims about an “all white group” “naturally” not “voting [Bridget] in” to the PPNA board (lines 17–18). Doug uses the same category “all white group” and activity “vote for you”, but questions Bridget’s presupposition that it is “natural” for this group not to vote for her. Doug oversimplifies Bridget’s claims about racism and her own identity, thus making her viewpoint sound absurd. Doug’s overt affective stance, “confused”, further serves to construct Bridget’s point as one that is incoherent.

Vanessa orients to Bridget’s broader claims about structural inequality in the neighborhood as a personal accusation of prejudice against Vanessa, similar to Whitehead & Wittig’s (2004) findings about ways people resist talking about racism. She then denies this accusation of racism through using her personal experiences to oppose the relationships Bridget constructs between categories, predicates, and activities. Vanessa uses membership categories to reference herself (“white”, “single mother”) and denies that Bridget’s predicates and activities apply to her (“don’t have a whole lot of economic power”, “not artsy”, “don’t garden”). Whereas Bridget discusses white identity and class differences as a structural inequality between different groups, Vanessa discusses these same issues as tied to her personal circumstances, and in doing so, opposes Bridget’s points through making them sound like absurd overgeneralizations. Vanessa also uses absurd descriptions when discussing her lack of gardening skills: “black thumb”, “sorry neighbors about my perpetually ugly yard”. These absurd claims serve to acknowledge Bridget’s point, oppose it, and support Vanessa’s reformulation of Bridget’s post as “stereotyping”. The term “stereotype” negatively evaluates Bridget’s characterizations as untrue generalizations about a group based on their “outside” appearances.

Vanessa opposes Bridget’s connections between “white” identities and the category bound activities of “not reaching out” to families of color (lines 33–36). She does so through claiming her personal want for “integration” and “love” and wanting to “reach out”, but then citing external factors that make her efforts ineffective (being “rebuffed or ignored”) or difficult to accomplish (being tired after a long

day) (Edwards 2003). Vanessa's strategies allow her to oppose Bridget's assertions about racism while still maintaining a positive, not racist, self-image. These claims also reproduce folk ideology through claiming that Vanessa has good intentions and therefore is not racist. In other words, Bridget orients to critical ideology of racism through foregrounding structural inequalities among different groups, and Vanessa orients to folk ideology through positioning racism as being about individual behavior and individual intent.

Negotiating 'normal' and 'abnormal' categories and activities

Analysis of the examples below illustrates how posters negotiate responsibilities of different categories in the device of race remedy racism. Wetherell (2003) showed how participants justified their racist stances through constructing some minorities and activities as normal and other minorities and activities as extreme and unreasonable. The participants below negotiate stances towards racism through the ways they construct and position 'normal' or 'unreasonable' white and minority categories. Morgan constructs minority categories as unreasonably upset and as needing to be patient with and teach reasonable white people about racism. Responses to Morgan construct white categories as needing to learn about racism without the help of minorities. All posters below identify as white (either in the excerpt or in parts of the post not shown).

(8) Morgan, Dec. 5, 2010, 8:40am

1 It is hard work to learn what white privilege is -- how it works. We miss so much and we
 2 don't even know what we're missing. If we want equality we need to ask Black and
 3 Hispanic people to clue us in -- be a bit patient and try not to look so incredulous when we
 4 insist our artsy, gardening, granola crunching ways mean we're not racist. That's the
 5 limits of my insight -- I still have no idea how to begin this process of building a truly
 6 inclusive community.

(9) Liz, Dec. 5, 2010, 5:04pm

7 For Morgan and others on this thread, I'm posting a notice of an upcoming 'More than
 8 Skin Deep' workshop. I highly recommend you attend if you can, or at least contact
 9 Susan Raffo (one of the presenters) and talk with her about ways you can get more info,
 10 experience, & insights without depending on people of color to teach it.

(10) Karly, Dec. 5, 2010, 5:54pm

11 Perhaps one way we can connect as neighbors is to hold workshops or meetups
 12 around the topic of privilege (in its various forms)?
 13 As an Ally, I firmly believe that it is necessary to bring something to the
 14 table. I can't just show up and expect to be told what it is I don't know.

Morgan starts her post with a lengthy personal narrative where she supports claims from previous posts about the structural nature of inequality among racial groups and then, in excerpt (8), outlines challenges with acknowledging "white

privilege”. Morgan constructs “white privilege” as a complex process, one that is “hard work to learn” for white people: “we miss so much and don’t even know what we’re missing”. As a solution to this problem, Morgan constructs “Black and Hispanic people” as needing to teach and be patient with “us” (white neighbors). Here, Morgan creates a teacher-student team of identity categories (Stokoe 2012): White people—including Morgan—are clueless, and Black and Hispanic people SHOULD BE patient teachers who help White people become better at understanding White privilege. Morgan constructs the institutional device of education as overlapping with the device of race. In creating this team, Morgan constructs White people as reasonable, yet clueless. Minorities, by contrast, are constructed as unreasonable: Morgan positions the category-tied predicate “try not to look so incredulous” as inexplicable or unwarranted (Wetherell 2003). Morgan then voices previous posts (“artsy, gardening”) and adds her own absurd description (“granola crunching”), which serves to acknowledge previous claims on this forum and position them as absurd. These strategies function to excuse well-intentioned white people from addressing racism or taking responsibility for their potentially racist behavior, thus aligning with folk ideology.

Liz and Karly reformulate the team of identities that Morgan constructed. Liz indexes the white membership category through naming “Morgan” and “others on this thread” and constructs a category-tied activity—‘treated by participants as not taken for granted and needing to be made explicit’ (Reynolds & Fitzgerald 2015:99)—that white people should NOT “depend on” the category “people of color” as teachers. Liz still orients to devices of education and race, but positions white people as being responsible for their own education about race and relieves people of color from the role of “teacher”. Karly uses “we” to index the membership category “neighbors”, which differs from Morgan’s use of “we” to index white neighbors. Karly repositions all neighbors as being in one community and as being able to “connect” through offline activities. Karly then uses the membership category “ally”, a term referencing white people who support people of color and their concerns. Karly also uses a category-tied activity, overtly stating activities expected for (white) allies: “bringing something to the table” and as NOT expecting to “be told what I don’t know”. Thus, Karly reformulates the “teacher-student” membership category team to an “ally-person of color” team, where each has an equal responsibility to participate in discussion about racism. Karly positions this team in the device of race and neighbors. Overall, Liz and Karly acknowledge, and attempt to change, the participation of white people in racism, thus aligning with critical racial ideology.

Erasing and renaming membership categories

Analysis of the following examples illustrates how participants’ choices to use or not use membership categories build stances towards racism as an abstract issue warranting debate or as a personal experience that needs to be voiced. The first

two posters—Steve and Doug—do not use membership categories and instead preserve a positive, nonracist identity for themselves through commenting on the inefficiency of the online media to discuss racism. The second two posters—Megan and Dee—use membership categories that name minorities and experiences of racism and positively evaluate the online discussion. Steve and Doug sent previous messages where they either do not engage with or overtly challenge critical discussions of racism by Shannon, Bridget, and numerous others. Below, they respond, in part, to off-listserv interactions that accuse Steve and Doug of participating incorrectly in this conversation.

(11) Steve, Dec. 4, 2010, 11:57pm

1 This is a huge topic and one that will probably never be solved on a listserv. Tempers
2 flare, posts go off topic, feelings are hurt and little is solved. That said, I probably should
3 not have said anything because I basically agree with a lot of what has been said and I
4 know how hard it is to have a productive conversation on a topic this big in a public,
5 written forum. Now here I am going on in detail while I know full well that email and
6 listserves are lousy places to discuss overwhelming issues like racism and poverty and
7 youth violence.

(12) Doug, Dec. 5, 2010, 5:02pm

8 Comments posted, questions raised but who has the answers? My day job for 23 year has
9 been fixing computer hardware. When I see a problem my reflex is to jump in and fix it.
10 On this topic many questions were raised, but I get the feeling my help is not wanted to
11 find a solution. I knew going in that posting on such a complex issue could be a bad idea,
12 but then there is my reflex to get to the bottom of things. I thought it would be worse to
13 ignore this all together. I'm going to fade out now on this subject and just listen. I hope
14 that this forum creates a new diverse groundswell of action. When someone asks for my
15 help I'll be back. Who has time? If not you, then who?

Steve and Doug use metadiscourse, or talk about talk (Craig 2008), when commenting on listserv interactions. Steve evaluates listserv interactions as not “solving” problems and instead as “lousy places” to have “productive conversations” about social issues. He also positions himself as “generally agreeing” with the conversation. Doing so allows Steve to blame the medium—and not himself—for his previous criticized post. Similarly, Doug constructs himself as a “problem-solver” and negatively evaluates the forum conversation for lacking “answers” or “solutions”. Billig’s (2001) analysis of metadiscourse during racist jokes illustrates how participants use metadiscourse (i.e. “I’m just joking”) as a way to justify racist comments as “just jokes” and therefore not racist. Similarly, Steve and Doug’s metadiscourse reframes their contributions in ways that preserve a not racist identity for themselves. Overall, Steve and Doug reproduce folk ideology of race through foregrounding their good intentions as excusing their potentially racist posts.

Whereas other posts (whether constructing racist experiences or minimizing them) use membership categories and in turn acknowledge racism applies to

specific individuals or groups, these posts do not. Instead Steve and Doug position racism as an abstract “issue” or “problem” that needs solving and then dismiss online discussion because it does not “solve” the problem. The metadiscourse and lack of membership categories, in a sense, erases racist experiences of Steve and Doug’s neighbors of color. Furthermore, if the purpose of this listserv is to discuss racism, then claims that criticize the discussion and its medium function to shut down these discussions and promote status quo relations in the neighborhood. The below posts use membership categories to highlight racism as applying to many neighbors who are participating in this discussion and positively evaluate the thread a space where minorities can voice these experiences.

(13) Megan, Dec. 5, 2010, 3:28am

- 1 I stand by what I wrote, what others wrote in solidarity, and by the very public voicing of
- 2 these problematic experiences by those of us who are not fortunate enough to be insulated
- 3 from the chronic and damaging daily impacts of these issues.

(14) Dee, Dec. 5, 2010, 8:15am

- 4 To Shannon and Bridget, and the family who originally shared their story, Thank you for
- 5 sharing your experiences with us. I think it was a very brave thing to do. And it reflected
- 6 what many people experience everyday. I couldn’t agree more with your statement, ‘many
- 7 people of color don’t bother to bring up these issues at all in white circles’ Precisely
- 8 because of the hostility and alienation we face when we try and talk about what we
- 9 experienced. I’m just happy to hear some voices from the silent half of powderhorn.

Megan formulates what people “wrote” as “the very public voicing of these problematic experiences” (lines 1–2). In other words, Megan positions the activity of posting as connected to bringing personal experiences into public conversations and therefore valuable. Megan indexes the category people of color through using the category bound predicate “who are not fortunate enough to be insulated”. This predicate constructs “white” and “people of color” as positioned categories constituting the devices of neighbors and race. Racial minority neighbors regularly face racism in this neighborhood, whereas White neighbors have the privilege to be “insulated” from these experiences.

Dee names and thanks previous posters for the activity of “sharing” and formulates sharing as “a brave thing to do” (line 5). Dee incorporates reported speech from Shannon and displays a positive stance towards this speech (Buttny 1997). Through reported speech and what follows, Dee also positions white and minority neighbors in a hierarchy: “people of color” do not discuss experiences of racism because white people are “hostile”. Thus, white neighbors often get to control conversations about racism. Dee draws parallels between talk about racism that occurs offline and online—where minorities often do not share their experiences or share them and are met with hostility by white people. Dee then uses the membership category “the silent half” to reference minority neighbors, thus foregrounding the restrictions on talking about racism that applies to this group. Megan and Dee align with critical ideology

of race through highlighting patterns in minorities' experiences talking about racism where white people often police these conversations.

DISCUSSION

This analysis illustrates the utility of MCA (Sacks 1972; Stokoe 2012) as a theoretical and methodological approach for analyzing discourses of racism. Aligning with goals of CRT, this article uses MCA to reveal strategies that question status quo racial hierarchies and strategies that attempt to uphold it (Flores 2018). Participants make status quo racism visible through constructing the device of 'race' as overlapping with 'neighbor' or 'family', thus highlighting the relevance of racism to many domains of experience. Participants also tell stories where they construct racial categories as simultaneously indexing identities of specific people (i.e. Shannon's family and the "older white lady") and inequalities among social groups (i.e. families of color and "ornery white people"). Participants constructed white and non-white categories as positioned categories (Stokoe 2012), both on individual and structural levels, through using category-bound activities and category-tied predicates to highlight hierarchies between the two. One strategy participants used to oppose stances of racism are category-tied activities (Reynolds & Fitzgerald 2015). In (8), Morgan uses the category-bound activity associating white people with being reasonable, but clueless and needing help from minorities. Responses use category-tied activities to make explicit that the reasonable thing for white people to do is to actively learn about racism.

Other participants' interactions upheld status quo racism through minimizing, denying, or erasing experiences of racism (Augoustinos & Every 2007). These interactions opposed critical orientations to racism through reformulating raced devices (i.e. parent of color) to nonraced devices (i.e. parents) or constructing racial categories as only personal identity categories. Doing so denied claims about the hierarchical relationship among different racial groups. Participants also attempted to excuse racist incidences through constructing minorities as unreasonably upset and white people as reasonably clueless (Wetherell 2003). Last, participants at times eliminated the use of categories altogether, which reframed racism from an experience embedded in everyday experiences to an abstract issue that is difficult to discuss on a listserv.

This article also illustrates how other discursive strategies such as absurdity (Antaki 2003), reported speech (Buttny 1997), breach formulations (Edwards 1994), three-part lists (Shrikant 2014), and metadiscourse (Billig 2001) support participants construction of membership categories. Absurdity questions the connections between categories and predicates or activities, reported speech constructs certain categories as racist, breach formulations help position categories as tied to individuals instead of group or patterned experiences, three-part lists allow participants to construct membership categories as simultaneously indexing individuals and groups, and metadiscourse criticizes conversations about inequalities between

categories or highlights the relationship between types of talk and inequalities among categories (i.e. “sharing” experiences of racism is brave for neighbors of color).

The above analysis addresses debates about connecting micro and macro aspects of language use (Tracy 1999) through illustrating how participants’ interactional goals motivate their alignment with different ideologies of racism. MCA of participants’ interactions illustrate that their choices oriented to different rhetorical and identity goals. Some participants’ goals include constructing reasonable stances that racism regularly occurs in daily experience and is a structural phenomenon. Identity goals included highlighting the unequal position, and relatively negative experiences, of neighbors of color in the neighborhood. These goals motivated alignment with critical ideology of racism (Hill 2008). Other participants’ goals include to oppose critical orientations to racism or to excuse racist incidences as individual instances by well-intentioned people. Identity goals include preserving a not racist, reasonable identity while doing so. These goals motivate alignment with colorblind (Bonilla-Silva 2003) and folk (Hill 2008) ideologies of racism.

In addition, findings highlight the locally tied ways that racism occurs and is discussed. Participants’ categories constituted the device of ‘race’ as overlapping with ‘neighbors’, ‘family’, or ‘education’, all of which are specific to the context of neighbors discussing racism in a family neighborhood and offering workshops to remedy racism. These differ from the ways participants discuss racism on news media (Hodges 2015) or in online comments (Cresswell et al. 2014). Similarly, participants’ interactions aligned with folk, colorblind, or critical ideologies of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Hill 2008), which differs from studies of racism in institutional contexts where interactions align with or question neoliberal (Modan 2002; Urciuoli 2009; Jia Lou 2010; Shrikant & Musselwhite 2018) or essentialist (Shrikant 2018) ideologies of racism. Thus, while ideologies may be widely circulated and shared, the kinds of ideologies (of racism) most relevant to a context is revealed through close analysis of participants’ interactions.

This analysis provides some practical insight into how to discuss racism. Similar to Rosa & Flores (2017), this article uses findings to imagine creating a more just society, primarily through encouraging people in positions of power to change their practices. Findings provide small, yet important, insights into how (white) people can more effectively understand minority experiences and participate in discussions of racism. People can learn to use and interpret racial membership categories as both personal and indexical of group inequalities, learn to re-construct the white category as actively participating in dismantling racism instead of as passive, ignorant, and well-intentioned, and can focus on listening to minority stances without immediately using absurdity to oppose them. More broadly, this article points to a discrepancy between minorities—who orient to racism as an extremely personal matter—and many white people—who orient to racism as an abstract issue that can be argued. Orienting to racism as a personal, emotionally

connected issue might prompt more sensitive, empathetic conversations around racism.

NOTES

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¹<http://forums.e-democracy.org/>

²<https://www.netrootsnation.org/profile/miskinoor/>

³<https://www.mncompass.org/>

⁴<https://www.ppna.org/>; <https://www.powderhorn365.com>

⁵See 'White people calling the police on Black people', *The Root*. Online: <https://www.theroot.com/tag/white-people-calling-the-police-on-black-people>.

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