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The Anatomy of ‘Race Trouble’ in Online Interactions

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Abstract

South Africa has a long history of race-related conflicts in a variety of settings, but the use of the concept 'racism' to analyse such conflicts is characterized by theoretical and methodological difficulties. In this article, we apply the alternative 'race trouble' framework developed by Durrheim, Mtose & Brown (2011) to the examination of racialized conflicts in online newspaper forums. We analyse the conflicts using an approach informed by conversation analytic and discursive psychological techniques, focusing in particular on the emergence and use of race and racism as interactional resources. Our findings reveal some mechanisms through which the continuing salience of race in South Africa comes to be reproduced in everyday interactions, thereby suggesting reasons why race continues to garner social and cultural importance. Disagreements over the nature of racism were also recurrent in the exchanges we examined, demonstrating the contested and shifting meanings of this concept in everyday interactions.

Key words: race; racism; race trouble; conflict; online interactions; South Africa

Introduction

South Africa has a long history of racialized conflict, exploitation, and oppression, and race classification remains a recurrent source of conflict between opposing factions in the post-apartheid era (Soudien 2008; Erasmus 2012). Social scientists have applied the concept of ‘racism’ to analyses of such conflicts, but these efforts have been characterized by a number of theoretical and methodological difficulties, particularly in the context of contemporary South Africa (Durrheim, Mtose and Brown 2011). A central feature of these difficulties is a lack of consensus on the definition of racism, with some proposed definitions emphasizing individual psychological or behavioural factors (e.g., Dovidio and Gaertner 2004); others focusing on social-structural and ideological factors (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 1997); and still others assuming a combination of different factors (e.g., Omi and Winant 1994). These definitional issues have resulted in considerable debate over matters such as how best to measure racism, and whether or not any given behaviour or event can properly be characterized as an instance of racism (see Durrheim in press).

Similar contestations are also apparent in everyday discourse, with efforts to avoid being labelled ‘racist’ resulting in repeated iterations of accusations, denials, and counter-accusations of racism that are underpinned by disputes over the nature and definition of this concept (see, e.g., van Dijk 1992; Durrheim, Mtose and Brown 2011). This further exacerbates the difficulties in conducting social scientific research on racism using methods such as surveys, interviews, and other forms of self-report data, since participants who become aware that the research is focusing on matters of race tend to work to resist any possibility of being seen as ‘racist’ in the reports they

provide to the researcher – an issue that has long been recognised by social scientists (see, e.g., Leach 2005).

In light of these difficulties, Durrheim, Mtose and Brown (2011) advocate a shift from a ‘racism’ theoretical framework to one of ‘race trouble’, which they define as interaction in which racism is either implicitly or explicitly at stake. This shifts the analytic focus from one that seeks to adopt an *a priori* definition of racism and then locate, measure, or examine instances of it; to one that focuses on situated practices and activities through which race-relevant social divisions are produced – in ways that take ideas about racism into account. This involves a concurrent shift from the use of self-report methodologies in which the participants are aware they are being studied, to the examination of exchanges as they occur in everyday, non-research settings (cf. Whitehead's [2011] discussion of the benefits of using 'naturally occurring' interactional data for studies of race).

In this article, we apply this ‘race trouble’ framework to the examination of the interactional organization and unfolding of racialized conflicts in online South African newspaper forums. The history and ongoing legacy of racial segregation and injustice in South Africa (Bentley & Habib, 2008) means that concerns about race and racism are always ready to hand to explain events in the world and reactions to these events, and for debating these accounts. In such explaining and accounting in news reports and discussions, race and racism are continually being refashioned to serve particular situated interests. On occasion, this refashioning can be studied directly, as race and racism become explicit topics of discussion. At other times, however, these concerns remain unstated implicit themes (see Whitehead 2009;

Durrheim 2012), while still being potentially available to be taken up explicitly in social actions. Using online newspaper forums as a data source thus enables researchers to examine the practices and activities through which race trouble is produced and managed, without relying on the kind of approaches that enter the definitional minefield described above. In addition, these forums allow us to follow the trajectory of discussions to investigate how implicit themes of race and racism become explicit, and how this shapes interactions.

Our analysis is based on purposively sampled exchanges from two popular South African news media websites, namely *News24* and *Independent Online (IOL)*. Exchanges that constituted ‘race trouble’ (i.e., exchanges characterized by conflict, antipathy, insults, strong disagreements, etc., and where there was some mention of race, whether early on or later in the exchange) were collected over a three-month period from May to July 2012. A ‘sampling to redundancy’ strategy was employed, with sampling of new exchanges continuing concurrently with initial analyses of the data until it became clear that adding additional exchanges to the sample was no longer yielding novel analyses. This point of redundancy was reached after a total of 32 exchanges had been collected.

It should be noted that the use of online interactions necessarily excludes people without access to the internet – although it is worth noting that ownership of smart phones on which users can read and comment on news articles is relatively widespread, even in informal settlements. A further consideration is that many people who read online news may choose not to participate in the associated comment forums unless they feel strongly enough about the matters at hand to consider the

effort involved in participating to be worthwhile. This may result in these forums having higher potential for emotive or conflicting interactions, due to the higher degree of investment in the issues at hand among the participants. However, this is precisely what makes such forums a prime context for the examination of conflicts. Moreover, our analytic focus was not on the particular individuals involved in the exchanges, but rather on the nature of the exchanges themselves. Thus we examine some recurrent features of racialized conflicts, rather than making distributional claims about the frequency with which such conflicts, or features thereof, happen in South Africa as a whole or in particular settings (cf. Schegloff 1993). To this end, we analysed the exchanges using a qualitative approach drawing on insights from conversation analysis (Schegloff 2007a) and discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter 1992)¹.

We focused in particular on the emergence and use of race as an interactional resource in the conflicts, thereby examining both the interactional trajectories (initiation, progression, and termination) of the exchanges, and the ways in which the participants employed and/or resisted taken-for-granted or ‘common-sense’ knowledge about particular categories of people (see Schegloff 2007b; Stokoe 2012) as a basis for producing actions or interpreting the actions of others. In accordance with this analytic approach and focus, the data extracts that we examine in the following sections were chosen to exemplify features that were recurrent in the data, while also demonstrating the range of variations in their realization across individual cases. As such, although our analysis may not represent an exhaustive account of the entire range of possible features of the conflicts we examine, it offers insights into

some ways in which race trouble is manifesting in South Africa, and these insights may also be relevant for the consideration of similar exchanges in other countries.

Conflict Initiation

The initiation of a conflicting exchange is accomplished as such only when a second participant responds in such a way that lodges an objection to something within a first participant's post. It is, therefore, always the responding post that indicates that there is something 'troublesome' in the previous post. Nevertheless, once the initiating post has been established as the one touching off a conflict, there are points to be made about the features of such posts, and the ways in which they are responded to. These initiating pairs can thus be explored as two-part units, with similar basic features to those of what conversation analysts have described as 'adjacency pairs' (see Schegloff 2007a).

This can be seen in Extract 1², which is drawn from the discussion of a story about remarks made by (white) South African model Jessica Leandra Dos Santos on her Twitter feed on May 4, 2012. She stated, "Just, well took on an arrogant and disrespectful kaffir³ inside Spar. Should have punched him, should have", which provoked strong reactions and accusations of racism against her from the media and public. In response to this story (and at the beginning of the extract below), Anton Burger produces a post that becomes the first part of a conflict-initiating unit when it is subjected to a strong response by a subsequent participant, Nono123.

Extract 1 [*IOL*, May 5, 2012; *Model's racist rant costs her*]

Anton Burger

Oh please.....get over it. I get racist things said to me by blacks, but so what. I don't have a problem with my skin color, so say what you like, see if I care. Blacks are the biggest racists, but we don't make major issues of it.....

Nono123

Im sure you can produce proof that blacks are the biggest racists. If you are a doormat and allow people to walk all over you that's your problem just don't expect other people to act as docile as you. I have white friends (one is my best friend) who I know that they are not racist so lets stop generalizing. My circle of friends of al races detest any kind of discrimination be it racism, homophobia etc in our midst.

In this exchange, Anton Burger trivializes the incident reported in the story, suggesting that people should 'get over it'. He then elaborates by providing a basis for this suggestion that invokes his personal experiences of treatment at the hands of people of another racial category, claiming that he has had 'racist things said to [him] by blacks', before minimizing the impact of these experiences. Finally, he produces a generalized claim about racism ('Blacks are the biggest racists, but we don't make major issues of it') that follows from his descriptions of his experiences and thus uses his authority as one who has had such experiences to support this more abstract claim.

Nono123 rejects Anton Burger's claims in three ways. Firstly, Nono123 directly disputes the factual basis of Anton Burger's generalized claim about racism, using a sarcastic opening sentence ('Im sure you can produce proof that blacks are the

biggest racists’), thereby expressing doubt that he could produce any such ‘proof’.

This part of Nono123’s response points to the importance (for the participants) that is placed on providing ‘factual’ evidence for generalized claims such as the one Anton Burger has formulated.

Secondly, Nono123 goes on to account for how Anton Burger may have experienced racism at the hands of black people by suggesting that it results from him being ‘a doormat’ and ‘docile’ – one who allows people ‘to walk all over [him]’. Nono123 does not challenge his personal experience in the same way that s/he has challenged the objectivity of his generalized claim about racism, but rather treats it as idiosyncratic, and the result of his own personality. This is noteworthy in light of the experiential basis for Anton Burger’s claims, along with Sacks’ (1984) seminal observations about the strong rights that individuals are normatively accorded over their own experiences. That is, it may be difficult for Nono123 to claim as a matter of objective fact that Anton Burger is ‘wrong’ about his experiences, since doing so would put him/her at risk of being seen as overstepping the bounds of his/her entitlement to comment on experiences that s/he did not directly experience for him/herself (Sacks 1984). However, by offering a personalized account for Anton Burger’s experiences, Nono123 discounts them as idiosyncratic and as being Anton Burger’s own fault (cf. van Dijk 1992), rather than as indicative of the broader culpability of ‘black people’ that Anton Burger has claimed.

Finally, Nono123 uses his/her own experience of white friends who are ‘not racist’ to call on Anton Burger to ‘stop generalizing’, while simultaneously distancing him/herself from the type of ‘racist’ acts that Anton Burger has reported by claiming

that his/her 'circle of friends of all races detest any kind of discrimination be it racism, homophobia etc in our midst'. Nono123 thus treats racism as an individual matter, rather than being differentially bound to entire categories of people, as Anton Burger had claimed. In addition, this serves to display Nono123's opposition to any individual who would engage in racist actions, which may be a way of protecting him/her from being accused of condoning racism on the basis of his/her account for why Anton Burger may have been subjected to it (cf. van Dijk 1992).

A second, partially contrasting, example of a conflict initiation is shown in Extract 2, which is also drawn from the discussion of Jessica Leandra Dos Santos's Twitter remarks. As was the case in Extract 1, the first part of the exchange involves generalized claims about racism, which are again formulated as being based on personal experience. In this case, however, the responding poster engages in a purely personal attack on the initiating poster, rather than disputing her claims on their own merits.

Extract 2 [*IOL*, May 5, 2012; *Model's racist rant costs her*]

RethabileRamohloa

White people that I have met and that I am friends with, have been good to me, including my boss. so really racism depends on an individual. To be a racist is a choice!!! And to love others is also a choice!!!

MrBharanzi

U lick a@se no good for nothing u must be a maid. Come to think of it this is a guise u are a white person 100%....

RethabileRamohloa's post follows a similar format to that of Anton Burger in Extract 1, first recounting her experiences with people of another racial category ('White people that I have met and that I am friends with, have been good to me, including my boss'), before treating them (as shown by the connecting word 'so') as a basis for the claim that 'racism depends on an individual'. By stating that white people with whom she has interacted have been 'good' to her, and making particular mention of her (white) boss' kindness, RethabileRamohloa both invokes and resists the assumption that white people (and white employers in particular) would be expected to be racist, or at least not 'good' to people like her.

MrBharanzi responds to RethabileRamohloa's posts with a series of insults, beginning with a characterization of her as a 'licka@se no good for nothing', followed by a suggestion that she 'must be a maid'. This serves to treat 'licka@se' and 'maid' as mutually implicative categories – a move that appears to use an implicit reference to the forced subservience of (predominantly black) domestic workers to their (predominantly white) employers that was a feature of domestic labor during apartheid (Cock 1980) and has largely remained so in the post-apartheid period, becoming a platform for race trouble and a concern to be managed (Durrheim, Jacobs and Dixon under review). In this way, MrBharanzi works to discount RethabileRamohloa's reported experiences, and her associated claims about racism, by treating them as indicative of her status as a 'licka@se' and/or a 'maid', thereby dismissing them on the basis of (what he claims to be) her evident membership in these categories. He then escalates this practice by claiming that 'this is a guise u are a white person 100%', thereby suggesting that even the categories he has placed her

in thus far could not adequately account for her actions, and hence that only ‘a white person’ could make such claims. MrBharanzi thus undermines RethabileRamohloa’s credibility as a legitimate participant of the discussion, thereby calling into question the entire content of her statement without directly disputing the factuality of specific aspects thereof, and casting himself in the position of having the authority to dismiss her post. This use of attributions of particular personal characteristics to a participant as a way of accounting for (and thus dismissing) her personal experiences parallels the practice that Nono123 employed in responding to Anton Burger in Extract 1.

Taken together, these extracts demonstrate the way in which producers of the second part of the conflict initiation unit contingently decide which aspect(s) of the first part of the unit to respond to, and how to respond to them. In this way, the second part of the unit is observably shaped by and fitted to the affordances and constraints offered by the first. Thus, while claims framed as ‘factual’ in nature can be easily disputed by appealing to counter-claims of a similarly ‘factual’ nature, those based on personal experiences seem to occasion more personalized practices for disputing them. These extracts also show how ‘racism’ acquires its meaning in contexts where different accounts of what qualifies as racism are counterposed. The ordinary discourse here resembles its academic cousin, with individualizing psychological accounts and collectivizing sociological accounts being used to undermine each other as participants work to problematize different things.

Conflicts in which explicitly race-related words such as ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘race’, and ‘racist’ appeared in the opening comment (of which the first two extracts are examples) were recurrent in the data set. In some cases, however, race was

explicitly introduced first in a responding post, with a participant treating something in a prior post as alluding to race (Whitehead 2009) even though race had not been explicitly mentioned in that post. This is illustrated in the following extract, which is from a discussion of a report about a protest march organised by the official opposition party, Democratic Alliance (DA) outside the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) headquarters. The DA protested COSATU's opposition to a youth wage subsidy programme proposed by the Treasury, which the DA claimed would create employment. During the course of the march, COSATU members attempted to prevent the protestors from carrying out their protest action, resulting in a violent confrontation between the two groups. COSATU spokesperson Patrick Craven later said that the union members' hostility was 'justified', and criticised the DA's support of the youth wage subsidy, disputing their claim that it would create new jobs.

Extract 3 [*News24*, May 15, 2012; *Hostility justified, Cosatu says*]

watchman

I am not at all surprised that these animals behave the way they do and then have the audacity to try and justify it as well. As so many have learned with wild animals, you think you have tamed them only for them to turn on you at some stage and attack because that is what they do best. Well done Vavi and you bunch of uncouth scum who are only there to live like Malema off the workers and the poor who are stupid enough to believe the drivel you spout.

Alfred Luis

Why whites SA'S haven't get over the notion of referring blacks as animals, this is sickening.

At no point in his post does watchman explicitly refer to a racial category. However, it is noteworthy (particularly in light of Alfred Luis' subsequent responding post) that watchman compares the people discussed in the news article to 'animals' and 'wild animals', and suggests that 'what they do best' is 'turn on you at some stage and attack'. He thus suggests that the people he is referring to were acting on the basis of irrational ('animal') instincts before retrospectively attempting to justify their actions. In addition, he subsequently makes it clear that it is actions of the union members (rather than, for example, the DA protestors) that he is describing in this way, as he refers to the COSATU leadership (including General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi) as 'Vavi and you bunch of uncouth scum'. His use of third person formulations throughout his post is also noteworthy, as he effectively speaks on behalf of categories such as 'the workers' and 'the poor' while simultaneously displaying that he does not identify himself as a member of these categories (as a first person reference such as 'we workers' would have done).

In his response, Alfred Luis makes it clear that he has interpreted watchman's post as being racialized, asking why 'whites SA's haven't get over the notion of referring blacks as animals' before expressing his distaste for watchman's post ('this is sickening'). This response treats watchman's reference to 'animals' as the specifically race-relevant feature of his post, while also displaying Alfred Luis' assumption that it was produced by a white South African – which he implicitly treats as the basis for his objection to it. While Alfred Luis does not specify the basis for his claim that watchman was referring specifically to 'blacks', nor for his assumption that watchman is a white South African, the features of watchman's post described above

provide a range of evidence for the reasoning Alfred Luis may have applied in this regard. That is, Alfred Luis may be treating watchman's references to 'animals', and his suggestions that the people in question are violent and irrational, as constituting tacit instances of appeals to representations (both historical and contemporary) of black people as exhibiting such characteristics (see, for e.g., Dubow 1995; Bowman 2010 for discussions of these representations). This possibility is consistent with Alfred Luis' suggestion of continuity between historical racial practices and watchman's present referring practices, as shown by the words 'haven't get over' in his response.

This extract demonstrates the contingent nature of conflict initiations, with participants' inferences about whether a post can properly be treated as racialized, and about the racial and other identities of the poster, being bound up with whether and how the post is disputed in a responding post. Along with the other extracts we have examined in this section, this illustrates that the initiation of a conflict requires a range of interactional and interpretive work that, as we show in the following section, also characterizes the unfolding of conflicts following the pair of posts that serves to initiate them.

Progression and Termination

In this section we examine the interactional trajectories of the conflicts as they unfold following their initiation. The progression of conflicts includes posts following the opening pair that are responsive to that opening, and concerns whether, when, and how the subsequent discussion reaches a point of termination of the conflict.

One way in which conflicts can unfold is through a progressive heightening or escalation of the dispute (see Garcia 1991) before terminating at a point where further escalation would be difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish. An instance of this is shown in Extract 4, which is drawn from the discussion following an article reporting a speech by Winnie Mandela to a June 2012 gathering of members of the African National Congress, or ANC (South Africa's ruling party since the first democratic elections in 1994), who were celebrating the party's centenary. Mandela warned members against the potential disintegration of the party, encouraging them to take steps to keep the ANC in power. The exchange begins with a post from AnthonyfromAfrica, who mockingly presents a series of 'quotes' that he suggests represent 'a day in the life of "Smilification"', another participant in the forum.

Extract 4 [*News24*, June 30, 2012; *ANC is 'haemorrhaging' – Winnie*]

AnthonyfromAfrica

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF "SMILIFICATION"

""YOU ARE ALL IDIOTS. YOUR "HERO" IS MURDERING SCUM.""

""Keep that trap closed. You are attracting flies with the amount of bull\$hit you are talking""

""I threaten whoever I want dumba\$\$....."

""WHITE TRASH""

""Your just a troll with a dirty mouth. Go and play on the highway""

Some might think you are very cute, but most of the rest of us, think very different about you
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Smilification@ZUMA'SPEAR.COM

White trash - Nobody asked you.... stop trolling my posts. AND I DONT GIVE A \$HIT
WHAT PEOPLE THINK :)

themba.thwala.98

SmilingFart, what have you "brought?" That's what I'd prefer to moan about, wanker

Smilification@ZUMA'SPEAR.COM

Themba- Some people wank... and others rape.

AnthonyfromAfrica

Yes, and others fill up space with FILTH !!!

Smilification@ZUMA'SPEAR.COM

Dammit Anthony! Agreed, you and themba should close your mouths. :O Thats solves the
filth problem. Better yet..both of you should shoot yourselves and your penises off!

The first post in the extract follows a lengthy exchange involving a number of participants, including an escalating racialized conflict between Smilification@ZUMA'SPEAR.COM and themba.thwala.98 prior to the extract. In the first post shown in the extract, AnthonyfromAfrica enters the dispute by criticizing Smilification and thereby implicitly aligning with themba.thwala.98. It is noteworthy that AnthonyfromAfrica ends this mocking post with a claim that 'Some might think

you are very cute, but most of the rest of us, think very different about you’, thereby adding a clear statement of antipathy to what might otherwise have been seen as a light-hearted post.

In response, Smilification@ZUMA'SPEAR.COM uses a racialized insult (‘white trash’) to refer to AnthonyfromAfrica (thereby displaying an inference about AnthonyfromAfrica’s racial identity and using it as a basis for insulting him), and orients to the unsolicited character of his entry into the exchange (‘Nobody asked you.... stop trolling my posts’). Themba.thwala.98 then re-enters the dispute, using a mocking form of Smilification@ZUMA'SPEAR.COM’s screen name (‘Smiling Fart’) and producing a sexualized insult (‘wanker’ – a colloquial term used to refer to a male masturbator). In response, Smilification@ZUMA'SPEAR.COM exploits themba.thwala.98’s use of this term to direct an escalated insult at him, suggesting that ‘Some people wank... and others rape’ and thereby implicitly calling him (or other people like him) a rapist. AnthonyfromAfrica then charges Smilification@ZUMA'SPEAR.COM with filling up ‘the space with FILTH’ which, although it does not reach the degree of racialized and sexualized escalation of the other two participants’ previous posts, nonetheless represents an escalation relative to his own previous mocking post through which he entered the dispute.

This series of highly personalized and escalating posts is finally brought to a close when Smilification@ZUMA'SPEAR.COM produces an extreme proposal of violence against both themba.thwala.98 and AnthonyfromAfrica, after which no further responding posts are added to the exchange. This final post is so forceful that further escalation of the conflict after this point would be extremely difficult.

Moreover, after escalation to such an extreme point, it may be difficult for the participants to interactionally negotiate a de-escalation of the conflict (Garcia 1991; Greatbatch and Dingwall 1997). Thus, with both further escalation and de-escalation being difficult to accomplish, termination of the exchange, accomplished through the withdrawal of participation by all the parties involved, may be the most feasible remaining possibility at such a point.

A similar kind of escalation is shown in Extract 5, but in this case the exchange terminates following a shift from escalation to mockery by one of the protagonists. This exchange opens with a participant's response to a news article that reported how two girls were arrested by a security guard for chewing gum on the Gautrain, a state-of-the-art commuter train on which eating and drinking are forbidden.

Extract 5 [*News24*, July 17, 2012; *Sisters held for chewing gum on Gautrain*]

alan.ingram.355

I took my 3 grand children (ages between 2 and 5) on the Gautrain one Sunday and i gave them biscuits to eat in front of security and they said 'nix'

1)cause i was a male and would have 'klaped' him if he made a remark

2) the security man more than likely wanted sex with them and they told him off!

mark.grant.77920

Alan im sure you white? I didnt want to make this another race issue, but thanks for giving me the freedom to mention this. Im sure you white and thats the reason why. Black people are just scared to confront white people, Thats it!

rob.baggaley

@ mark.grant. To quote you. "Black people are just scared to confront white people, That's it!"

Yet they hi-jack, murder & rape whites daily !

themba.thwala.98

Baggaley, I've alive for over 35 years but have never hijacked, murdered or raped any white person. Why are you lumping me with other scum? There's an over-concentration of racism in your head. I hope you choke on it one day while you zealously feed on it

rob.baggaley

@thwala.98. Good for you.

Seems like you have a "hard on" for me, in your crusade to uncover so called racists. Your ANC continually "lumps me" with all other whites, when it continually refers to whites this....whites that! Not so?

Sad world you live in....." Ah here a racist, there a racist, everywhere a racist. "

In his opening post, alan.ingram.355 poses a puzzle about how he and his grandchildren were subjected to different treatment than the children reported on in the news article, before proposing two possible solutions – neither of which is explicitly racialized. In response, mark.grant.77920 proposes a different, racialized solution to this puzzle, using attributions of alan.ingram.355 and (implicitly) the security guards' and the girls' racial identities (cf. Extracts 2 and 3 above) to formulate a generalized claim about race that accounts for the security guards not saying anything to him: 'Black people are just scared to confront white people [*sic*]'. This claim also implicitly suggests culpability on the part of white people for the

proposed fear that black people have of approaching them – that is, it invites readers to consider why black people might have such a fear, with white racism then serving as an ‘obvious’ account for it (cf. Whitehead 2009).

Rob.baggaley then enters the exchange, quoting this generalized claim from mark.grant.77920’s before contrasting it with a counter-claim (‘Yet they hi-jack, murder & rape whites daily!’), which also takes the form of a generalized statement about people of a particular racial category. Moreover, this claim serves as an escalated counter-accusation to the implicit accusation made in mark.grant.77920’s post, juxtaposing the subtle suggestion of white racism in mark.grant.77920’s post with a claim about the openly violent actions of black people against ‘whites’, and thereby shifting black people from the position of victims of racism (in mark.grant.77920’s post) to racial aggressors.

In response, themba.thwala.98 treats rob.baggaley’s accusation as being directed at him, denying that he has ever committed any of the violent offenses mentioned in rob.baggaley’s post, and asking why rob.baggaley was ‘lumping [him] with other scum’. Themba.thwala.98 thus resists rob.baggaley’s accusation by using his racial identity (thereby implicitly identifying himself as ‘black’) in conjunction with a denial of ever having done the things that are mentioned in the accusation to undermine the racial generalization. He then launches an attack on rob.baggaley, attributing his actions to ‘an over-concentration of racism in [his] head’ and expressing hope that it ‘one day’ results in harm to him. This post can thus be seen as an escalation of the dispute in a number of senses; including the conversion of a generalized claim into a personalized one, the production of a personalized counter-

accusation of racism directed at the prior poster, and the expression of hope for a negative (and potentially deadly) consequence for the prior poster.

Rob.baggaley responds once more, initially escalating the dispute before shifting to a more mocking tone. Specifically, he uses a sexualized image ('hard on') to liken themba.thwala.98 to a 'crusader' – one who would hunt out 'so called racists' and get sexually excited while doing so. He then produces another counter-accusation, claiming that 'Your ANC continually "lumps me" with all other whites, when it continually refers to whites this....whites that!', thus reversing themba.thwala.98's accusation of racism (see van Dijk 1992) by aligning him with the ruling ANC party (through his use of the word 'your') and then claiming that they perform the same kind of 'lumping' that themba.thwala.98 has just accused him of. However, this escalation is then diffused by the way in which he distances himself from the argument ('sad world you live in.....') – which serves to propose that he himself is not part of this 'world'. He finishes his post by parodying the nursery rhyme 'Old MacDonald Had a Farm', thereby mocking what he has previously characterized as themba.thwala.98's 'crusade to uncover so called racists', and treating the enthusiasm with which they (both) engaged in the argument as ridiculous. No further posts are produced following rob.baggaley's shift to mockery, suggesting that the production of such mockery can serve as mechanism for termination of disputes by virtue of turning a reflective gaze onto the dispute, thereby effectively de-escalating it, and making subsequent attempts to continue or re-escalate it vulnerable to further mockery.

Another way in which de-escalation can occur is through a shift from personalized and accusatory or insulting posts to more those with a more generalized and ‘objective’ tone – which is effectively the reverse of the type of escalation seen in Extracts 4 and 5. An instance of this is shown in Extract 6, which is an extended version of Extract 1.

Extract 6 [*IOL*, May 5, 2012; *Model's racist rant costs her*]

Anton Burger

Oh please.....get over it. I get racist things said to me by blacks, but so what. I don't have a problem with my skin color, so say what you like, see if I care. Blacks are the biggest racists, but we don't make major issues of it.....

Nono123

Im sure you can produce proof that blacks are the biggest racists. If you are a doormat and allow people to walk all over you that's your problem just don't expect other people to act as docile as you. I have white friends (one is my best friend) who I know that they are not racist so lets stop generalizing. My circle of friends of al races detest any kind of discrimination be it racism, homophobia etc in our midst.

Thabo

Africans fire-bombed in Tel Aviv by Racists in the Past week.

Racists twice fire-bombed shelters where africans have taken refuge in Tel Aviv, Israel in the last week. Haaretz report that blacks are now living in fear.

Racism is everywhere !

AndrevanGraanSilverSilver

Why is there only racism where blacks are then?

WhosthatWoman

Not where blacks are, only where fascists are!

Mikel

I think he exclaimed that it is everywhere

Following the personalized account produced by Nono123 that serves to establish a conflict in response to Anton Burger's opening post (as described in the analysis of Extract 1 in the previous section), Thabo responds by giving evidence for how 'racism is everywhere' by using an example from a news report about 'Africans' and 'blacks' being subjected to violent attacks. He then treats this as evidence that 'Racism is everywhere', thus making a generalized claim (in contrast to the personalized claim Nono123 has just produced) that racism, at least against black people, is prevalent worldwide. AndrevanGraanSilver disputes this claim, asking what is designed to be an 'unanswerable question' (Heinemann 2008), that serves to implicitly align him with Anton Burger by blaming 'blacks' in particular for racism, while maintaining the shift from personalized to generalized claims initiated by Thabo. WhosthatWoman then counters the claim embedded in AndrevanGraanSilver's question with another generalized claim, suggesting that 'fascists' are responsible for racism. Mikel then intervenes by suggesting that the previous participants have misunderstood what Thabo's was saying, showing by his use of the word 'everywhere' (which was also in Thabo's post) that he is referring to Thabo's post. He thus offers a reflection on the basis for the dispute (cf. Extract 5

above), while addressing what should be considered the ‘correct’ interpretation of Thabo’s post, as opposed to making any novel claims of his own. This post completes the movement of the exchange from a highly personalized and indignant one (in Nono123’s post) to a generalized and reflective one focused on the ‘facts’ at hand, after which no subsequent posts are produced.

The extracts we have examined in this section thus illustrate a range of potential contingencies in the unfolding of racialized conflicts, including their continuation by either the original participants or by additional participants joining in, and their termination following either escalation to a point where further escalation would be difficult, or de-escalation through a change in the tone and focus of posts (i.e., through shifts from highly personalized and emotive claims to the use of mockery or more generalized, reflective, and ‘objective’ claims). A final noteworthy feature of the termination is that in contrast to previous research examining disputes in other interactional settings (e.g., Vuchinich 1990; Garcia 1991; Greatbatch and Dingwall 1997), none of the disputes we examined terminated as a result of the achievement of consensus or conciliation. This suggests that a feature of the recurrent patterns of escalation of the exchanges that we have described is a systematic preference for ‘walkouts’ (Dersley and Wootton 2001) over consensus or conciliation. This may be at least partly a function of the constraints and affordances of the online setting in which the exchanges are situated, and the types of relationships between participants that are prevalent in such a setting – for example, if the participants have no ties (such as friendship or kinship) prior to encountering each

other in these forums, then there would be no systematic preference to protect such ties by avoiding conflict or repairing it when it occurs (cf. Heritage 1984).

Conclusions

Our analysis has described some features of ‘race trouble’ in South African online newspaper forums. Our findings demonstrate a range of recurrent features, while illustrating the thoroughly contingent nature of the initiation, progression, and termination of the conflicts, and thus the interactional and interpretive work required to set in motion and sustain them as they unfold. The centrality of race in this interactional and interpretive work illustrates the way in which race remains a pervasive resource in everyday South African discourse; always potentially at hand as a lens through which to produce or respond to a move in an interaction, thereby being introduced into whatever exchange is currently in progress. Even in cases where such uses of race are treated as a basis for objections about a participant’s conduct, race is recurrently produced as a taken-for-granted resource by participants on all sides of the dispute.

This is illustrated by the way in which participants recurrently formulated their own actions, or responded to others’ actions, in terms of racial categories and identities, even when a discussion was previously not explicitly racialized. Moreover, it is noteworthy that a range of attributes of participants (including names, political affiliations, and occupations) were recurrently treated as markers of their racial identities, which were then mobilised for particular interactional purposes⁴. In this sense, race was intricately woven into the conflicts: it was not just related to the topic

of objection, or used as the reason for having the conflict, but also served a resource for inferring, claiming, or contesting things about people, events, or experiences; thus serving as a shorthand for a broad swath of social knowledge (see Schegloff 2007b; Whitehead 2012). While this knowledge may not be recognized as ‘factual’ in a scientific sense (Schegloff 2007b), it served the practical purposes of providing a shared, albeit contested, basis for producing and interpreting actions in the exchanges we examined. Thus, our findings demonstrate that race-related conflict is something that is understood by South Africans – it may be treated with disapproval or distaste or agreement, but appears never to be met with confusion or a lack of understanding (cf. Whitehead 2013). This is consistent with Seekings’ (2008: 22) suggestion that ‘race remains of enormous social and cultural importance despite a decline in economic – and political – importance’.

Our findings reveal some mechanisms through which this continuing salience of race comes to be reproduced in everyday interactions, thereby suggesting reasons why race continues to garner social and cultural importance. That is, racial categories and their associated stereotypical traits are deployed to great effect in explanations and accounts in social conflict. In generating agreement and disagreement, ideas about race form a basis for social solidarity and divisions. Racial identities and stereotypes are thus not simply sets of anachronistic and faulty ideas; they are part of the fabric of social life in post-apartheid South Africa (also see Durrheim and Dixon 2004).

It is in these terms that we wish to displace the concept of racism with that of race trouble. ‘Racism’ is a matter of concern to ordinary people as they participate in

the kinds of interaction that we have considered in this article (and in many other kinds of interaction). As people talk about race, act in ways that they believe reveal their racial identities, or make judgements about others' talk and actions, they do so in the light of ideas about racism and its social meanings. Not only do they take racism into account in acting in these ways, but they also re-fashion the meaning of the concept of racism to suit their situated purposes. Like ideas about race, racism is therefore to be understood as a construction that gains its meaning (at least partly) from the social context in which it is used. The concept of race trouble directs our attention to the analysis of these social contexts, to study how race and racism continue to work in our society.

Notes

¹ A number of recent studies have applied these approaches to the examination of online interactions (see, e.g., Sneijder and Te Molder 2005; Antaki et al. 2006).

² The data extracts are presented in a slightly simplified, graphics-free form of their appearance on the news websites, with the screen names of participants shown in bold, followed by verbatim text of their posts. As is the case on both websites from which the extracts are drawn, indentation of posts is used to indicate whether they were produced as responses to the news article itself (or as general comments directed at nobody in particular), or whether they were specifically responding to a prior post.

³ This highly charged racial epithet was used during the apartheid period to refer to black people, and has been outlawed as hate speech since the *Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act* was passed in 2000.

⁴ This phenomenon is reminiscent of Sacks' (1989) discussion of the way in which names can be treated as indicators of ethnic or racial identities, thus enabling category-based inferences about actions performed by the people whose names have been revealed.

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