"It Depends How You're Saying It": The Complexities of Everyday Racism

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While racism is widely recognised as a complex social phenomenon, the basis for defining and identifying everyday racism from a lay perspective is not well understood. This exploration of factors used to frame everyday racism draws on seven cognitive interviews and four focus groups conducted in November 2010 and January 2011 with Australian adults predominantly from Anglo ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The study reveals lay theorising centring on tropes of intentionality, effect of speech, relationality and acceptability. Participants were more likely to think of racism as having negative, overtly offensive and emotional connotations. Racialised speech that was not considered to be blatantly racist was more contested, with participants engaging in complex theorising to determine whether or not such speech constituted racism. The study also highlights the potential of qualitative research to inform survey development as an unobtrusive method for in-depth participant reflection. The ambiguous nature of everyday racism demonstrated in this paper indicates a need to foster more nuanced lay understandings of racism that encompass the subtle, rational and complementary expressions that can be situated within institutions and society.

Racism is a complex and enduring social problem that exists in many forms at institutional, interpersonal and individual levels. Racism can be broadly defined as a phenomenon that maintains or exacerbates avoidable and unfair inequalities in power, resources, or opportunities across racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious groups in society. While the inclusion of religion in such definitions has been debated, we include it in recognition of its frequent conflation with ethnicity and culture in popular culture (Hartman et al. 2011). Moreover, while we recognise culture is not synonymous with race or ethnicity, in some parts of the world, including Australia, culture is commonly used as a proxy for, and conflated with, race and/or ethnicity and/or religion (Moran 2011). At a personal level, racism can be expressed through beliefs (e.g., negative and inaccurate stereotypes), emotions (e.g., fear or hatred), or behaviours/practices (e.g., unfair treatment) (Berman and Paradies 2010). Some research suggests that attitudes are stable phenomenon stored in long-term memory while other evidence indicates attitudes are constructed "on the spot" in response to particular situations. Given these mixed findings, most scholars now acknowledge that attitudes have both stable and contextually variable elements (Akrami et al. 2009; Bohner and Dickel 2011). More specifically, there is evidence that while contextual factors affect level of prejudice, stable personality traits still account for an individual's level of prejudice in relation to others in the same situation (Akrami et al. 2009).

The term "everyday racism" references the recurrent and normalised existence of racism as "infused into familiar practices" such as talk (including jokes) and behaviour

(Essed 1991, 3). Everyday racism pertains to mundane discourse and practices rather than extreme incidents. It is embedded in routine and everyday practice and can be experienced as amorphous and ambiguous (Essed 1991).

A range of qualitative research has examined people's lived experiences as targets of racism (Essed 1990, 1991) while the broader concept of diversity has been studied among people from the majority group (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Some psychological research has considered lay or folk conceptualisations of racism, largely focused on stereotypes, essentialism and ideologies (Levy, Chiu, and Hong 2006) as well as the causes and persistence of racism (Esses and Hodson 2006). A more extensive body of psychological scholarship has examined the ambiguity of defining racism from the target's perspective, such as studies exploring attributional ambiguity (Crocker et al. 1991; Major, Quinton, and Schmader 2003; Hoyt et al. 2007).

In-depth analyses of racism in context pursued within discursive psychology tend to focus on how and in what ways discourse can be characterised as racist as determined by researchers (Augoustinos and Every 2007; Van Dijk 2003; Tuffin 2008). In particular, this scholarship is concerned with "the study of racist discourse and rhetoric in terms of its psychological and political functions" (Tuffin 2008, 594), on "every-day sense making in terms of how it functions rhetorically within interaction" (Hanson-Easey, Alen, and Augoustinos 2012, 29) and on the denial of racism (Augoustinos and Every 2007). Instead of identifying racism and its functions within discourse and interaction, our paper focuses on how lay participants discuss racism, including both its abstract definition and its concrete expression in particular situations involving everyday racism. To put it simply, instead of focusing on "racism in talk," we examine "talk about racism."

To our knowledge, and according to other scholars, there has been little previous research examining the complex and nuanced attribution of everyday racism from the perspective of majority group members (Sommers and Norton 2006). In fact, there has been scant attention to lay conceptions more broadly, with scholars largely considering everyday actors as "unreflexive formulators of stereo-

typed views, bearers of prejudiced attitudes, or agents of discriminatory behaviour" (Figgou and Condor, 219) while the concept of "racism" remains an unexamined "backdrop for analysis" (Figgou and Condor 2006, 220). This point has been emphasised most recently by Billig (2012, 152) who notes, "there is little social scientific work to fall back upon, in order to demonstrate what people consider to be prototypical examples of prejudice and discrimination."

Our research builds in particular on issues identified by three recent studies. A study conducted with twenty-six school students in Australia found that although racism was often "taken-for-granted" with a shared common-sense understanding, much discussion was nonetheless concerned with defining racism in relation to tropes such as freedom of speech (McLeod and Yates 2003). Figgou and Condor (2006, 237) focused on "documenting the ways in which the constructs of prejudice and racism were employed as rhetorical resources" as they related to Albanian immigration in Greece. A significant finding across thirty-two semi-structured interviews was a distinction between conceptual understandings of racism and prejudice and how these concepts were drawn upon as rhetorical strategies to describe situations in practice. At a conceptual level, respondents questioned the accuracy of stereotypes that negatively portray Albanians as criminals – but then reiterated these stereotypes when considering everyday situations (Figgou and Condor 2006). Finally, a comparative sociological study looked at how Black professionals in Brazil and South Africa made sense of the persistence of racism at a societal level (Silva 2012). While these studies begin to explore lay conceptualisations, there is a need to explore in greater detail how people define and identify everyday racism in order to inform more effective anti-racism strategies.

1. Methods
The data utilised in this paper is drawn from a larger project to assess community and organisational capacity/readiness to respond to racism witnessed in interpersonal situations or identified in organisational culture (Pennay and Paradies 2011). Specifically, the research draws on four focus groups (each with seven or eight participants) conducted in November 2010 and seven cognitive interviews

conducted in January 2011 (no participant was involved in both an interview and focus group). Data collection was conducted in Melbourne, Australia, to inform the development of a structured telephone survey instrument intended to understand factors that enable or prevent action by those who witness racism. As the transcribed interview and focus group data yielded sufficient information for thematic saturation, no further recruitment was required (Morgan 2008).

Participants were working adults (25–50 years old) involved in local community sports clubs either directly or via their children. Participants included an even mix of genders, a diverse range of occupations across socioeconomic levels, and were from predominantly Anglo-Australian backgrounds. The focus groups were purposively selected such that two focus groups were undertaken with "blue-collar" participants (those in skilled or unskilled manual employment) and two with "white-collar" participants (those in professional or para-professional employment). While detailed information about the racial, ethnic and cultural background of participants was not explicitly collected by the Social Research Centre, such information was gathered from transcripts as the majority of participants identified their racial, ethnic or cultural background when responding to questions during the interviews and focus groups.

Research ethics approval for the study was granted by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science Ethics Committee at La Trobe University (#917-10). Participants were recruited via a market research agency with quotas set to ensure equal representation of blue- and white-collar employees. Interviews and cognitive interviews were conducted on site at the Social Research Centre by experienced qualitative interviewers. A $60 reimbursement to cover out-of-pocket expenses was provided to participants.

Cognitive interviewing or testing is a widely utilised qualitative technique for informing survey development by understanding the cognitive processes that individuals engage in when attempting to respond to survey items (Willis 2005; Beatty and Willis 2007). This method has been used effectively to determine the quality of survey items in terms of performance functionality, validity and reliability (Latcheva 2011; Reeve et al. 2011). Although sharing many similarities with other forms of qualitative interviewing, cognitive testing tends to include a suite of specific techniques such as respondent observation, concurrent think-aloud techniques, paraphrasing tasks, probes, confidence ratings and answer elaboration (Hak, van der Veel, and Ommundsen 2006; Beatty and Willis 2007).

Participants in the individual cognitive interviews were asked questions from a survey about their views on the acceptability of various forms of racism (slang, jokes, insults/verbal abuse and comments on social media websites). For example, they were asked whether it would be acceptable to tell a racist joke when a person of that background was present and could have been offended. They were also asked whether it was acceptable for someone to tell a racist joke when the person of that background was not present and no harm was intended. Here, the issues are threefold: (1) the presence of the targeted person, (2) the intent of the joke, and (3) the potential for offence. Cognitive interview techniques included (1) follow-up probes to determine what comes to mind when asked about these phenomena (e.g. when we use a term like racist slang, what sort of things are you thinking of?), (2) respondent observation (e.g. so do you find that question a bit confusing?), (3) confidence ratings to assess participants' response options (e.g. why would you agree as opposed to strongly agree?), and (4) answer elaboration (what is your main reason for strongly agreeing with all of those things?)

Focus groups enhance the validity of survey research by providing more detailed understanding of the topic under consideration (Wilkinson 1998) by: contributing to the identification of relevant theoretical concepts; assisting in the formulation of appropriate hypotheses; and aiding in effective communication with the target population (Fuller et al. 1993). For this study, a semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the focus groups, prompting participants to discuss situations where they had witnessed or observed racism, explain the nuances of racist incidents, and explore their perceptions of what constitutes racism. Cognitive interviewing techniques were not used in focus groups.

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed by a commercial provider and checked for accuracy by the first author. In the transcripts, separate lines denote a change in speaker and italicised text indicates the interviewer's speech. Compared to individual cognitive interviews, the fundamental unit of analysis for focus group research is the group itself, rather than the individual. In general, the explicit differentiation of individuals from qualitative focus group data is not appropriate for the purposes of analysis (i.e. in-depth one-on-one interviews are carried out for such a purpose). Instead, the conversational interaction between individuals is an important aspect of group research especially in terms of how they build consensus or provide opposing perspectives to support the discussion (Willis et al. 2009). We have drawn on this group dynamic in the focus groups to provide a richer understanding of lay conceptualisations of everyday racism.

Transcripts were coded using a content analysis approach in which pre-determined topics and constructs were used deductively to code the transcripts, searching the data for these categories and recording where and when they occur (Ryan and Bernard 2000). This process was conducted by all three authors separately with a focus on identifying categories where participants discussed racism as a conceptual construct, described types of racism, and considered factors that influenced the identification and acceptability of racism. The emerging categories were then discussed by all three authors before further coding and refining by the first author into a conceptual overview of themes and sub-themes describing the data. This iterative analysis process also included reviewing transcripts and emergent themes to consider in more detail how participants defined racism as a conceptual construct and how this compared to the ways they described racialised discourse in an everyday context. Common patterns and any differences or unique perspectives within the data were identified and incorporated into the analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Gibbs et al. 2007; Willis et al. 2007). Lastly, themes and sub-themes were linked to theoretical concepts relevant to the study (Green et al. 2007; Willis et al. 2007).

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the ways in which: (1) racism is defined at an abstract level from lay perspectives; (2) factors are used to determine whether a racialised comment is thought to constitute racism, including intent, relationality, potential for offence and online versus off-line contexts; (3) different types of racialised discourse, such as race-based jokes and racist slang are understood in relation to their perceived social acceptability; and (4) race-based talk (racialism) is identified as racism. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the potential benefits in utilising focus groups and interviews to discuss the complexities of identifying everyday racism.

2. Defining Racism

Focus group participants were initially asked to describe what they think of when they hear the word "racism." Most participants associated racism with negative connotations, especially a negative focus on difference, discrimination and disadvantage based on race and nationality, as well as a lack of acceptance.

Participants across both focus groups and cognitive interviews explained that racism is based on individual ignorance or a lack of knowledge, which can then lead to negative attitudes and behaviours toward difference. They also defined racism as a negative focus on racial differences that also denied a common humanity. For example, one cognitive interview participant stated, "I think it's almost like saying that even though we all have a heart and lungs and a soul and everything that you're just not human, you're different to me but not in a way of a different personality" (Interview 3, female white-collar). This supports previous findings that people understand prejudice as an irrational disregard of both individual differences and the commonality humans share as a species (Figgou and Condor 2006; Bain et al. 2012). In the following excerpt, unregulated extreme emotion and irrational behaviour are cited as visible markers of racism:

> *What sorts of attitudes or behaviours come to mind when you think about racism, what sort of behaviours?*
>
> Aggression
>
> *In what sense?*
>
> Oh just, very vocal, not placid, just very out there, heated, angry.
>
> Exclusion. […]

I think ignorance as well, you just judge instantly without knowing anything about anyone.

(Focus Group 2, female white-collar)

Ignorance.

Discrimination.

Just unacceptance [sic] and ignorance as well yeah.

A lack of understanding about the cultures.

I think it's a way of separating people not bringing them together.

(Focus Group 4, female blue-collar)

In this description, racism is not just about recognising difference, but also about excluding people based on that perceived difference. Furthermore, irrational thought processes such as judging other people unfairly based on racial and cultural differences to the exclusion of all other individual factors contribute to this lay understanding of racism.

In addition, participants also connected ignorance with unfamiliarity as a reason for racist attitudes and behaviours. A few participants suggested that a lack of close friends from other racial or cultural backgrounds contributed to ignorance, resulting in behaviour that excludes people based on negative and stereotyped constructions of difference.

A lot of it's based on ignorance and lack of understanding and lack of knowing. Because you see often, you might see someone who's racist and then all of a sudden an Indian person who moves in next door and they become friends with them, and all of a sudden they're no longer racist, you know, so they just get to know them.

(Focus Group 3, male white-collar)

In this example, the participant suggests that physical proximity to neighbours and exposure to people from different racial and cultural backgrounds contribute to the potential for friendship. This supports the research literature on intergroup contact and the role of friendship in promoting positive attitudes toward people from different cultural backgrounds (Pettigrew 2008).

In contrast to participants in other groups, the male blue-collar focus group participants mainly identified something as racism if it was aggressive or severe including swearing and physical violence. The group agreed that it is the intent behind the words or actions as well as the degree of severity that determine whether something is racist. The participants focused on examples of severe physical and verbal violence as being clear indicators of unacceptable and thus, racist behaviour:

Race based, racially motivated stabbings have occurred in groups as well. So, yeah, [group violence] for sure is severe.

Sledging in sport I would not put as severe because it hasn't led to violence yet.[1]

[…]

Yeah. Everything we're putting in severe seems to be physically hurting people.

Yeah.

Yep.

(Focus Group 1, male blue-collar)

Milder race-based behaviours such as some types of sledging were more contested in terms of whether they constituted racism. As a result, these participants tended to question whether drawing attention to racial differences is always negative, and thus always racist:

Racism can be positive as well, can't it? The definition of it, there's no [inherent] negative [association]. It's basically just saying someone is different for their race rather than, you know, someone who is bad for being racist. You could have positive racist things as well.

(Focus Group 1, male blue-collar)

Another participant from a different focus group indicated that there could be a continuum when thinking about racism, stating that it is "more negative than positive" (Focus Group 2, female white-collar). These descriptions begin to delve into the ambiguity of racism. Such lay theorising echoes the concept of "racialisation" that is broadly defined as the process by which situations with racial el-

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1 Sledging is a term used in sport, typically in cricket, to refer to verbal insults or intimidations to unnerve players on the opposing team.

ements become meaningful in different contexts (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Such situations can have aspects that constitute racism and/or anti-racism (Kowal et al. 2013). As noted by Giroux (2006), even in academic circles, racialisation is often erroneously considered as synonymous with racism.

Aside from these ambiguities about the valence of racism, participants were confident defining racism on an abstract level. According to their lay understanding, racism is characterised by ignorance, extreme emotion, aggression, an irrational and negative focus on racial difference, and demeaning behaviour. These lay conceptualisations of racism share with academic definitions a focus on "'blatant, simple, hot, direct' beliefs (i.e. ignorance), emotion (e.g. aggression) and behaviour (demeaning others) but fail to recognise 'more subtle, complex, cool, implicit biases'" (Dixon and Levine 2012, 304). There is also a failure to highlight broader issues of unfair treatment, power differentials and institutional racism. This omission is not surprising given the "invisible" nature of institutional racism and racist social structures (Williams 1985).

When asked to think about everyday situations in which racism might occur, identifying something as racism and considering whether it was acceptable or not was a much more difficult task for those participating in interviews and focus groups. The following sections explore specific factors that participants discussed as contributing to the situated ambiguity of identifying racism.

3. Identifying Everyday Racism

Building on the previous section, participants were given different situations involving race-based (or racialised) comments. Generally, the statements to which participants responded lacked details on the relationship between those involved in the hypothetical situation (e.g. someone told a racist joke about another person). In responding to the statements, participants clearly highlighted that it was important to know the specifics of social relationships in order to determine the acceptability of comments. In the following examples, participants focused on interpersonal considerations such as relational proximity, the position of the interlocutor, the intent and impact of comments, and

the presence or absence of a "target" person, including whether the comment was made face-to-face or online.

3.1. Relationality and Positionality

Relational proximity or familiarity was an important factor for participants to consider before making a racialised joke or using racialised slang, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

> Well, a group of mates you can say anything you want to, don't you? And they know what your opinions are, so they're not surprised by what you say. Whereas with people you don't know you have to guard your opinions a bit more until you know what their opinions are.
>
> (Focus Group 1, male blue-collar)

> If you've just met the person I probably just wouldn't go there but if you know what they're like and what their boundaries are.
>
> (Interview 4, male blue-collar)

> I mean you do say that because I've known her for a long time because we do as a joke sometimes make little funny comments and then we have a laugh because I say, well I can say that because I am Chinese. It's almost like having a joke with your family. We'll talk about bad drivers and you know the old, oh crazy Asian drivers. And you can say that.
>
> (Interview 1, female white-collar)

> Well my husband and his friends call each other "wog" and they can call each other that but nobody else can. You have to be in that circle, you know.
>
> (Focus Group 4, female blue-collar)

In the first three examples, relational proximity depends on how long people have known each other, how well they know each other, and what is considered appropriate within the context of a particular relationship. In the third and fourth examples, the authority to draw on prevalent stereotypes or to refer to someone using racist slang such as "wog", which has historically been used to demean people from a Mediterranean background (in particular Italians and Greeks), is also dependent on the shared identity of those present. Furthermore, because participants in the blue-collar focus groups were more likely to consider racialised behaviours or speech as potentially positive if done without malice or aggression, it was particularly important to assess whether the people witnessing the act were friends or at least knew each other.

3.2. Intent and Impact

The intent of a racist comment or joke and the impact of that on the targeted person were also key factors when deciding whether racism was acceptable. Given lay conceptualisations of racism as demeaning, derogatory and characterised by aggression (see section 2), it is not surprising that racist language used to insult or abuse another person was considered unacceptable by all participants. In contrast, a racist comment or joke was considered acceptable if no harm was intended:

> Racism is intent. Intent to be mean because someone is different to you that's what I think. (…)
>
> It's a power thing
>
> Bullying, bullying yeah it is, power.
>
> (Focus Group 4, female blue-collar)

> I've got team friends who have always called me "skip girl",[2] or "roo girl". I could, you know, someone could take offence to that. You don't because it's not given with bad intent.
>
> (Focus Group 4, female blue-collar)

> So you can understand sometimes it's maybe a term of endearment but it depends on how it's delivered isn't it, whether the comment is meant to be nasty or not.
>
> (Interview 1, female white-collar)

These examples suggest that intent behind the words determines whether racialised talk is perceived as friendly banter or as hurtful.

Additionally, the first example involves a discussion about racist behaviours in a workplace environment, such as using racist language to demean another person to assert perceived superiority. The participants described racism as akin to bullying because of a power differential present between the perpetrator and target in both racism and bullying. A participant in another focus group also described racism as similar to bullying in that racism is a form of bullying, but contended that not all bullying is necessarily race-based. He described issues at a junior community sports club:

> But there's not so much racism. I haven't heard any racism but it's the same sort of bullying, you know what I mean? We had a bullying issue this year and they were [12 years old and under].
>
> (Focus Group 1, male blue-collar)

This participant suggests that it is sometimes unclear whether bullying is race-based and, therefore, whether it constitutes racism.

Despite different considerations used to identify racism, most participants felt that even in the absence of malicious intent or when race-based talk was between people of the same background, if offence was taken or hurt ensued then the talk was considered unacceptable. Based on participants' earlier description of racism as fostering social exclusion on the basis of race, some lay theorising suggested that race-based speech is only acceptable if it does not serve to harm or exclude another person.

> As soon as you start hurting that person's feelings, that's when you've crossed the line.
>
> (Focus Group 1, male blue-collar)

> If you just tell them a joke to someone who obviously isn't of that race, then it's a joke as a joke, but it's. . .
>
> *But if it's harming someone?*
>
> Then it's racist.
>
> (Focus Group 1, male blue-collar)

> Maybe, how it affects the person that's receiving the information or receiving the exclusion . . . so you know, if they are taking offence and it's definitely, that's a problem. I think it's the receiver that makes that call, whether it was offensive or not.
>
> (Focus Group 2, female white-collar)

> My brother's girlfriend's of a Lebanese background but it all depends on how that girl or guy takes it. Some people don't like it at all, whereas some people like myself, I've got an ethnic background and nothing fazes me so it just doesn't matter what anyone says or does but I know there a lot of people that take offence.
>
> (Interview 4, male blue-collar)

These examples also reiterate the importance of knowing the audience of racialised comments.

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2 "Skip" is a slang term used to refer to Anglo Australians and is based on a popular children's television series from the 1960s, "Skippy the Bush Kangaroo". "Roo girl" is presumably also a reference to a common international perception that strongly associates Australia/Australians with kangaroos.

3.3. Presence or Absence of the Target Person

When cognitive interview participants were asked whether telling race-based jokes was acceptable, the presence or absence of the targeted person was a factor for determining social acceptability. Among cognitive interview participants, jokes were generally perceived to be less acceptable when the targeted person was present and could have been offended and more acceptable if the targeted person was not present and no harm was intended. However, one participant felt that it was worse when the targeted person was not present: "because then everyone's just laughing at them and they've got no chance to respond back" (Interview 2, female white-collar).

Reflecting the importance of understanding the context of everyday racism, cognitive interview participants who were asked whether posting a racist comment or joke was acceptable online (for example on social media websites) unanimously responded that such behaviour was never acceptable.

> It's never really acceptable because you don't really know who's looking at it. You've got no way of knowing your audience.
>
> (Interview 2, female white-collar)
>
> It's one thing to say [something because] it dissipates in the room. It's another thing to post it.
>
> (Interview 1, female white-collar)
>
> *And someone telling a racist joke about a certain racial or ethnic group when someone of that background was present and could've been offended, always, sometimes, rarely or never [acceptable]?*
>
> I suppose it depends on that person but rarely acceptable.
>
> *And someone posting a racist comment or joke about people from certain racial or ethnic backgrounds using social media such as Facebook or Twitter?*
>
> Never.
>
> (Interview 4, male white-collar)

Here, the question only asked about the acceptability of posting a racist comment or joke online. However, participants still explained that knowing the social context and clues that frame a racialised comment were important factors in determining social acceptability. Furthermore, compared to face-to-face interactions, these participants highlighted that posting racist comments or jokes online means that it is difficult to control who sees it, which

means that the relational context is absent and the potential to offend an unknown person is greater.

Focus group participants were also asked if they felt it was appropriate to make a race-based joke online. For example, in one focus group the interviewer asked if it was appropriate to send a race-based joke via e-mail and participants responded:

> I mean, it depends how you're saying it. Like, I said, it's emphasis; it depends how you're saying it. Like, you could type it in and type stuff in, but you haven't said it and meant it like they're interpreting it.
>
> You can't get sarcasm.
>
> That's why you got to actually be talking face-to-face to understand wavelength level.
>
> (Focus Group 1, male blue-collar)

They explained that clues present in face-to-face interactions such as body gestures and intonation were not as easily conveyed online and therefore, the meaning of discourse was unclear. It was then difficult to understand the intent of the words.

Overall, participants emphasised that race-based language needs to be understood in context. Situations where racialised talk is posted online highlighted the importance of this, once again demonstrating the situational ambiguity of identifying everyday racism. The next section explores this ambiguity within race-based jokes and general race-based comments that highlight individual racial or cultural differences.

4. Racism and Racialisation

In the process of identifying something as racist or not, participants touched on academic debates about the distinction between racialisation and racism (Berman and Paradies 2010; Giroux 2006). This was most evident when participants talked about race-based jokes and general comments that referred to race, particularly as these forms of racialised talk were not always overtly offensive or intentionally malicious. The following examples illustrate this:

> It's not a negative way of doing it because racism is just singling out someone for their race.

You're just trying to tell them who it is sort of thing you know. If you just say it's the white guy, it could be ten white guys that took the catch you know. But I don't know. Look, there's a fine line somewhere.

(Focus Group 1, male blue-collar)

But then again, with little kids too, they might say, look at that lady over there she's really black. And then they might say, have a look at that lady over there she's only got one leg they're just saying what they see.

(Focus Group 4, female blue-collar)

Here, participants recognise that racialisation may not always constitute racism.

Colour-blindness is an ideology contending that individuals should not notice, perceive or "see" race or racial difference. A frequent corollary is the belief that any form of racialisation is racist. In a post-racial environment, "colour-blindness" is perceived to be beneficial to society. However, despite the widespread belief in the social benefits of using a "colour-blind" approach, research indicates that colour-blindness has detrimental effects on minority groups (Trawalter and Richeson 2008; Plaut, Thomas, and Goren 2009), leads to negative inter-racial interactions (Norton et al. 2006; Correll, Park, and Smith 2008) and fails to prevent racial bias (Pahlke, Bigler, and Suizzo 2012). Rossing argues that: "Race marks physical and cultural traits by which people construct categories. It functions as an affirmative signifier in cases such as group solidarity, familial ties, and empowerment" (2012, 47). He continues: "If people equate seeing or discussing race with racism, then naming even the most obvious racial disparities is understood as racism and people are left without recourse to address racial injustice" (Rossing 2012, 50). The following subsections explore the ambiguity of race-based jokes and general race-based comments by examining the interplay between racialisation and racism in lay theorising, particularly whether, and in what circumstances, race-talk is considered racist or solely a neutral description of individual racial characteristics.

4.1. Is a Race-Based Joke Always Racist?

In the context of telling racist jokes, a few participants made a distinction between general racialised discourse and racialised jokes by pointing out the mediating role of comedy. They indicated that comedy allows people to talk about sen-sitive or provocative issues that are otherwise difficult to discuss. For example, one participant reflected, "I'd be horrified if someone heard me say [something that could be interpreted as racist]. I wouldn't intend it to be malicious. It might be funny but I mean that's what comedy, sometimes comedy touches on something" (Interview 7, male white-collar). As opposed to a colour-blind approach, which elides race altogether, comedy has the potential to provide a space where people can discuss complex social issues such as racism.

The ambiguity around whether a race-based joke constitutes racism or not highlights a dilemma articulated in existing literature. It supports Martin's observation that "even experts cannot agree on whether disparaging humour is evidence of prejudice, is evidence of rebellion against social conventions, or is simply benign" (2007, cited in Hodson, Rush, and MacInnes 2010). For example, one participant struggled with the potential social implications of race-based jokes:

I know that there's perhaps no offence intended necessarily but it does make me think, "Well we're all far more than just that." But it's ignorance and sometimes these jokes, they come from ignorance and they spread ignorance so my answer really should be that it's never okay, the more I think about it.

(Interview 3, female white-collar)

In relation to race, Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) argued that popular racial humour confirms damaging stereotypes more than it subverts them. Furthermore, "Haggins warns that comedy's various (mis)interpretations makes it difficult to determine if a critical, comedic discourse 'explod[es] stereotypes or merely reinforc[es] them'" (Rossing 2012, 53). The following focus group discussion further highlights these nuances:

With the Irish jokes, sorry, I don't think any of us thought of them as racist, because when we think of racism we think of something negative and aggressive with violence and vocal, whereas the Irish jokes were typically amusing and not meant to offend anyone.

But that classes them as a group of silly people, dumb people.

They have done that, but there was no malice involved, certainly.

Yeah dumb stuff.

You could say there was a race there, the Irish race […]

I think it probably came from the British don't you think, the background, the British ridiculing the Irish.

(Focus Group 2, female white-collar)

The first comment again contrasts a conceptual understanding of racism as aggressive and vocal with a perceived sense that even though jokes might be race-based, they are harmless if no offence is intended. The second comment challenges this by pointing out that the content of the joke still serves to perpetuate stereotypes of Irish people as stupid. This is contested by emphasising the harmless intent of the person telling the joke. Another person questions whether Irish people can be defined as belonging to a race. Finally, the historical context is evoked as a reason behind the stereotype and its present expression as a joke. As evident from this dialogue, there is no clear consensus over whether Irish jokes are demeaning (and hence whether they constitute racism according to lay conceptions).

4.2. Is Talking about Race Always Racist?

Overall, most participants felt that race-based comments about an individual simply described physical differences rather than constituting racism. Participant orientations ranged from colour-blind approaches that avoided talking about race to racialised approaches where racial differences were used to describe people. In the interviews, some participants felt that racialised comments were racist while others felt that race was used too often to erroneously frame a situation as racist.

In the following examples, participants described examples that they felt were not racist by using a colour-blind approach to detract from the social significance of race. The first example describes what the participant believed to be simply an expressed opinion based on driving through a suburb with a high proportion of people with a Vietnamese background. However, while a simple observation at one level, it is also racist because it assumes that Australians are White, thus excluding non-White Australians.

I'm just saying something that I don't like. You know, I drive through Springvale every now and then and I think, "Where has Australia gone?"

(Focus Group 1, male blue-collar)

Other participants questioned whether it is always necessary to mention race in certain situations:

If a Greek guy gets beat up, is it a racial attack or it just happened to be that the guy was Greek, why do you bother mentioning it?

Yeah, exactly.

It might be he just didn't like the guy.

(Focus Group 3, male white-collar)

I think sometimes people do play the racism card too sometimes, you know that sometimes they are being excluded for something or someone doesn't like someone and they think that's the reason why because maybe of past experiences with other people, but you know it might be for other reasons.

(Focus Group 2, female white-collar)

These participants felt that it was not always relevant to mention a person's racial, ethnic or cultural background because there could be other reasons to explain those situations. These observations highlight factors such as intent, which the media tends to gloss over. However, at the same time, the possibility that it was a racist attack is left to the interpretation of the perceiver rather than taking into account social power inequalities and the lived realities of everyday racism that many people from minority groups experience (Essed 1990).

Reflecting participant constructions of racism as negative and overtly insulting, some forms of racial stereotyping that were considered to be more positive or neutral were described as "generalisations" (Focus Group 3, male white-collar), "generic comments" (Focus Group 2, female white-collar) and "gentle stereotypes" (Interview 7, male white-collar). Participants also considered whether positive or complimentary stereotypes were racist:

A lot of people will come up and go, "I wish I was your colour", you know and, to them they take that as you're being offensive. But it's not, you're actually saying you like their olive skin.

But yeah I guess some people take it different to what some people actually are trying to come across.

(Focus Group 4, female blue-collar)

Related to this, participants also touched on othering, essentialisation and exoticisation:

Yeah you know, there's I mean there's such a range of, we've only just got some Sudanese people come to our neighbourhood and their skin is just like velvet. I, I look at that lady all the time it's she's got beautiful skin but I've never, I have never ever seen that, that darkness and it just fascinates me.

(Focus Group 4, female blue-collar)

Research suggests that complimentary stereotypes (e.g. relating to athleticism, musical and rhythmic ability, and social/sexual competence) are considered a form of racism by members of minority groups and are also strongly related to more traditional negative stereotypes (Czopp and Monteigh 2006; Czopp 2008).

Additionally, participants suggested that some potentially offensive comments were not racist because they did not include malicious intent, were not based on hatred or were made by people who have friends from culturally diverse backgrounds (implying that they cannot also be racist). This supports lay theorising that racism is rooted in extreme volatile emotions, and so racialised comments that were judged as less harmful were not considered to be racist. However, research demonstrates that subtle racism is just as harmful if not more harmful than blatant racism (Dovidio 2001; Major, Quinton, and Schmader 2003; Yoo, Steger, and Lee 2010). Additionally, lay theorising that racism is about exclusion supports the idea that if someone has friends from different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, then that person cannot also be racist. One focus group participant commented:

I know a few people that make generic comments that you know, they might say things like, "Oh, the bloody Asians," or things like that but at the same time they've got friends that are Asians.

(Focus Group 2, female white-collar)

Another participant immediately responded:

[I'm] exactly the same, and I do it sometimes, and I don't literally mean it because I have friends of all different backgrounds but when you are driving and you are like, "Oh, Indian driver," or sometimes we'll say it or, "Taxi drivers are always the worst" … we are already grouping them but I don't mean it as in I hate them.

(Focus Group 2, female white-collar)

Here, the participants seemed to take a slightly defensive stance as potential perpetrators of racism. They justified

potentially offensive comments by claiming they are inclusive of people from different cultures and by emphasising that their comments were not due to racial hatred. The second participant begins to consider the effect of the comment by acknowledging that they are "grouping" people based on racial or cultural background, but says that this does not imply hatred of the group.

A few participants utilised empathic and reflexive skills to observe that race-based comments used to describe people were not always simple descriptions of people but could actually be offensive regardless of perceived intent. One participant talked about her children's reference to Lebanese people and at first justifies the comment saying that she believed their intent was not hateful but then considers that it could still be offensive to Lebanese people.

Even when they're talking about Lebanese they go, "Oh, they're Lebos" … I don't necessarily think that he hates Lebanese people but I think that they're the kinds of things that that question brings up to me and I think that a Lebanese person may or may not be offended but you're taking a chance so therefore I think it's not acceptable.

(Interview 3, female white-collar)

Another participant commented that it is never acceptable to use a racist slang term or phrase to describe someone. She then decided "it's probably okay" to tell a racist joke about someone from a particular racial group if no-one of that background is present and no harm is intended. However, she changed her answer again to the survey response option of "rarely acceptable" after considering what it would be like to be the person from that targeted background and how it would make her feel. She also considered broader societal impacts:

I think, "Well when is it okay and when isn't it okay?" and that's made me think that it's really never okay because if you say rarely, that 1 percent between rarely and never, if it's 1 percent it might mean that that goes out into the community and spreads and it's not okay.

(Interview 3, female white-collar)

These comments begin to question whether past experiences that participants thought were not racist might have actually been unacceptable and possibly racist. Some par-

ticipants went further to consider times when they expressed racist attitudes by giving examples of judgments they have made about other people based on race. This is the topic of the next section.

5. Examining Racism

As participants delved deeper into discussions about whether something was racist or simply race-based talk, several reflected on examples when they had exhibited racist attitudes. One of the cognitive interview respondents who identified himself as Anglo admitted to prejudice against other cultures while still engaging in nuanced lay theorising about racism (Interview 5, male white-collar). This was also acknowledged in a focus group in response to a prompt from the interviewer about whether "everybody is a little bit racist." The participants acknowledged that it is not a good thing to be racist but admitted that they may have been racist without thinking about it:

> I wouldn't like to think that I'm racist, and maybe there is occasions where I have been unintentionally, because like you talk about human behaviour, it just becomes natural in the conversation, I like to think I judge people individually but, you know, I'm sure there's occasions when people don't realise they are being racist you know. . .
>
> *Ok yeah, what do other people think about that statement?*
>
> It's not a nice statement, but I think it's true. Like we don't like to think about it. We don't like to think that it would be the case for ourselves, but I think it's quite truthful at the end of the day. I'm sure we are all racist somewhere along the line if we are pushed. It could be a situation we are not familiar with.
>
> (Focus Group 2, female white-collar)

Similarly, in another focus group, the participants discussed how the older generations may have racist attitudes toward Japanese people even if they might be "good decent people". Following these observations, one participant talked about how a Japanese student, who was staying in her home, was scared of a slug and poured salt on it:

> And I just remember going in my head saying, oh they were renowned for torture 'cause she was Japanese. Just in my head I just thought what a cruel thing to do. And I thought you know I don't consider myself but yet I, came up with that thought in my head.
>
> (Focus Group 4, female blue-collar).

In the context of talking about her perception that older generations were more racist, this participant volunteered an example of how she also has racist thoughts about Japanese people.

Finally, reflective thinking about racist attitudes was also demonstrated in a focus group with male blue-collar participants. When the interviewer asked, "Is everyone a little bit racist?" participants responded by referencing a previous discussion about a participant getting upset about the school not including Christmas carols and decorations due to complaints from some of the Muslim parents:

> I am [a little bit racist] with certain things like what I was saying before.
>
> What you were saying about the Christmas carols.
>
> Yeah, that really got to me. I got really angry with them then.
>
> (Focus Group 1, male blue-collar)

These focus group participants in particular were able to draw on group dynamics that encouraged lay theorising about racism to feel more comfortable talking openly about times when they might have been "a bit racist". Based on the premise established by the interviewer that maybe "everyone is a little bit racist," it then became more socially acceptable within that group to reflect on their own attitudes toward race and racism.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that lay understandings of racism are conceptualised through tropes of speaker intention, effect of speech, and familiarity between speakers and listeners and/or targets. Rather than being primarily concerned with whether or not they generally appear racist (Figgou and Condor 2006; Augoustinos and Every 2007) or denying the existence of racism (Nelson 2013), these tropes demonstrate that some majority group members possess sophisticated, nuanced perspectives on racism. Importantly, these lay understandings encompass the dialectic between intention and effect, the situational ambiguity of meaning-making and the moderating influence of familiarity on a recognised potential for offence ever-present within race-related speech.

Participants were clear about what they considered racism to be when they were asked to describe it. This included strongly negative associations that focused on speech that was demeaning, deliberately insulting and hateful. They were, however, less clear about the everyday context of racialised speech. Participants were frequently unsure whether racialised jokes, stereotypes, or statements about individual characteristics constituted racism and whether they were socially acceptable. For example, most felt it was less acceptable if a "target" person of a joke or comment was present due to a perceived risk that the targeted person would be offended. Additionally, it was considered to be more acceptable if the person was a close friend and it was never acceptable if a racialised comment was posted online because there is no control over who might see it.

Due to negative connotations associated with racism, it is common for people to distance themselves from the stigma of racism and prejudice in discussions of racism (Figgou and Condor 2006), with previous scholarship suggesting that a key function of lay theories of racism is to disavow personal membership in the category "racist" (Sommers and Norton 2006). In this study, it seems that interviews and focus groups conducted to inform survey development allowed participants to reflect on the wording of questions and to explore the situated meaning of racism rather than being asked directly to identify their attitudes and beliefs relating to racism. This contrasts with the study by Figgou and Condor (2006) where participants employed rhetorical strategies to frame hostile behaviour against Albanian refugees as stemming from perceived risk and insecurity rather than from racism or exclusion. It is, however, consonant with the study by McLeod and Yates (2003) where students were comfortable discussing the nature of racism even though it was not the topic of the study and focused instead on young people's general attitudes, sense of self and relation to school.

Questions that prompted thinking about the acceptability of racial jokes or discrimination in different situations (among friends, online, in the workplace, or at a community sports club) provided an opportunity to consider contextual factors without triggering concerns about social desirability, response presentation or the need to disavow personal racism. The effect may be similar to that achieved through projective or third-person survey techniques in which questions focus on what other people think. Such an approach places respondents at a more comfortable "psychological distance" from a sensitive topic at the same time as their personal beliefs become projected onto, or ascribed to, their responses (Supphellen, Kvitastein, and Johanson 1997). This effect may also constitute a step towards reflexive anti-racism, a term encompassing an understanding of anti-racism as a goal to strive for, while acknowledging that being non-racist is virtually unattainable for individuals in contemporary societies (Kowal et al. 2013).

Finally, some participants reflected that the interview allowed them to think more deeply about racism in everyday situations. For example, one male participant stated:

> It's the sort of topic that no one deals with directly. It's not about belief, it's something that only shows up when you're actually starting to be pushed on some of the, drill down on the actual facts of how it is.
>
> (Interview 5, male white-collar)

One participant said at the start of the interview: "We don't think about it, and questions like this make you think, so they're very good questions and they're making me think" (Interview 3, female white-collar). Reflecting at the end of the interview, she said: "Well I suppose it's made me re-focus on my own values of what I think of racism and different cultures" (Interview 3, female white-collar).

This study highlights the need for further research on the nuances of racism from everyday lay perspectives, especially by those from majority backgrounds. Additional distinctions that could be considered include the social acceptability of racialised discourse, intersections between racism and bullying, and whether and under what conditions participants consider specific comments, jokes and descriptions to be racist. Further exploration in other national settings, with minority and majority groups as well as socio-demographic variations by gender, age and social class, is also required.

An in-depth analysis of lay theorising about everyday racism has the potential to inform anti-racism interventions

and add to existing anti-racist scholarship (Paradies et al. 2009; Pedersen et al. 2011). Understanding how people think about racial, ethnic and cultural differences and how they understand racism and discrimination is a critical first step in combating racism and promoting positive attitudes to cultural diversity across society. Such knowledge of understandings and conceptualisations of racism among majority participants is particularly pertinent to reorienting social norms and to promoting transformative anti-racism approaches that recognise and redress structural power inequalities due to racial/ethnic categories. In particular, increased awareness of contemporary racism is strongly associated with reducing racism at the individual level (Gawronski et al. 2012). This study highlights the need for lay understandings of racism to encompass subtle as well as blatant expressions; positive as well as negative stereotypes; and rational as well as irrational behaviour. Echoing critiques of existing academic scholarship (Howarth and Hook 2005; Reicher 2007; Berard 2008; Anthony 2012), our findings indicate a need for lay theorising to include the broader impact of racist talk beyond the immediate situation in which it occurs (e.g. impact even when a member of the target group is not present) and to foster a deeper understanding of everyday racism as situated within institutions and social relations of power (including the benefits that accrue to dominate groups in society).

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