

# **‘I don’t think racism is that bad any more’: Exploring the ‘end of racism’ discourse among students in English schools**

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Accepted version for *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 46 (2016), pp. 171–184.

## **Abstract**

In this paper we present findings on lay constructions of racism from a focus group study (11 groups, n= 72) with a mixed sample of secondary school students in England. We show that racism was, on the whole, ‘othered’: it was located in other times, places, people, or was denied altogether. We show that this way of talking about racism had different uses depending on the identity stakes involved in different interactional contexts. Even in the cases where racism was constructed as common, participants worked hard to make an ‘irrefutable’ argument, which suggests that they were anticipating reputational damage by making a claim for the persistence of racism. We discuss these findings with regards to the different levels of analysis involved in constructions of racism (micro/interactional, local, and broader normative context) and with regards to an ‘end of racism’ discourse that appeared to provide the normative framework for participants’ accounts.

**Keywords:** Racism; prejudice; constructions of race; end of racism; children; education; England

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Constructions of racism**

While social psychologists have been primarily concerned with what makes people prejudiced or racist (see Dovidio, 2001), the ways that people experience and understand racism have also recently attracted some interest (see Barreto, 2014). What constitutes racism in practice is difficult to define: there is often ambiguity in attributing events or behaviours to racism. For example, there may be uncertainty about whether an event (e.g., not being hired for a job) is due to prejudice or other factors

(Crocker & Major, 1989; Major, Quinton & Schmader, 2003). Experimental research in this field has taken a prototype approach drawing on the social cognition tradition. This literature suggests that perceptions of prejudice are based on prototypes (i.e., expectancies with regards to the perpetrators and victims of prejudice). This research suggests that when experiences match people's prototypes, people are more likely to label such experiences as racist. Such prototypes are, for example, that racism is principally directed from whites to blacks and that sexism is directed from men to women (Inman & Baron, 1996). Some situations are also understood as more prototypical than others (e.g., encounters with police: Flournoy, Prentice-Dunn, & Klinger, 2002). Finally, 'old-fashioned' overt racism is more prototypical compared to 'subtle' racism (Sommers & Norton, 2006).

Prototype research further suggests that group membership of the perceiver is a key factor affecting the likelihood that behaviours will be labelled as prejudiced. Minorities appear to be more 'vigilant' in perceiving prejudice, meaning that they are more likely to make attributions to racism and discrimination compared to majorities (Kaiser & Major, 2006). For example, Inman and Baron (1996) found that female participants were more likely than male participants to label potentially prejudiced behaviours as sexist, and African Americans were more likely to label potentially prejudiced acts as racist compared with white participants. Sommers and Norton (2006) found that non-white respondents were more likely to label behaviours associated with subtle racism as racist compared to white respondents. On the other hand, however, minority group members also appear to be reluctant to *report* discrimination, particularly when it occurs to them personally (see Kaiser & Major, 2006; Stangor, Swim, Sechrist, DeCoster, Van Allen, & Ottenbreit, 2003), in public, or in the presence of a non-stigmatised group member (Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002). This finding is attributed to the efforts of minority group individuals not to be seen as 'causing trouble' (Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003). Experimental research therefore suggests that, while minorities perceive more racism, they are also more reluctant to report it.

The social cognition approach has been criticised because it attributes lay understandings of race and racism to cognitive structures (such as prototypes) without paying adequate attention to their particularities and historical-ideological context (Billig, 2002; Condor, 1988; Howarth, 2009). Howarth (2006) suggests that racism is a socially elaborated system of representation that is embedded in institutions and in the everyday ways in which we relate with others. It is not simply a perceptual issue, but a “rich representational practice” (Reicher, 2012, p. 43) which involves contested representations of ‘us’, of ‘them’, and of social relations. Constructions of race and racism thus serve ideological functions such as marginalising, excluding or blaming ‘others’, and legitimating the actions of ingroups (Augoustinos & Every, 2007). In line with this idea, researchers have studied racism as an aspect of social practice: they suggest (contrary to prototype research) that ‘race’ and ‘racism’ are actively constructed in social interactions.

Two recent examples of how racism is constructed within specific social, historical and ideological contexts are Wilkins (2012) and Kadianaki (2014) (see also Mott & Condor, 1997, on sexual harassment). Although coming from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, both of these authors observed how members of minority groups (African-American men on university campus and immigrants living in Greece, respectively) actively constructed problematic experiences as ‘ignorance’ rather than ‘racism’. Wilkins (2012) ascribed this construction to ‘moderate blackness’: as black men in a white dominated campus, performing an easy-going and restrained blackness enabled them to fit in and to avoid an ‘angry black man’ identity. For Kadianaki (2014), constructing experiences as ignorance (rather than racism) enabled immigrants to cope with stigma whereby valued identities can be reconstructed against a backdrop of stigmatising representations.

The work of Wilkins (2012) and Kadianaki (2014) therefore contrasts with prototype research by exploring lay constructions of racism within everyday lived experiences. This research indicates that there are broader social and historical contexts that impact on how racism is understood within day

to day practice. Gee (1990) describes these representational systems as 'big D' Discourses which are different from 'small d' discourses. 'Small d' discourses relate to micro-interactions managed in talk and text. For instance, research in discursive psychology has explored how race and racism are not given categories but are constructed in language through discursive practices (e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). These studies focus on the performativity of language; that is, on the discursive strategies that people employ to legitimise or deny prejudice in everyday talk (Augoustinos, 2013; Augoustinos & Every 2007, 2010; van Dijk, 1992), and will be outlined in more detail below.

Billig et al. (1988) have argued that the difficulty in attributing events and behaviours to racism is due to a widespread norm against prejudice. In this normative system, prejudice and racism are considered illegitimate criteria for judging outgroups. The fact that expressing prejudiced views is so strongly linked with the 'I'm not racist, but' disclaimer, Billig (2012) argues, suggests that the social construction and contestation of racism itself should be the subject of social psychological analyses of racism. There are several studies that illustrate empirically the kinds of rhetorical devices that people use to 'dodge the identity of prejudice' (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) for themselves and for the groups they are affiliated with (Condor, Figgou, Abell, Gibson, & Stevenson et al., 2006). Van Dijk (1992) has explored the various ways that people deny racism: for example, denying that they committed a prejudiced act or arguing that the act was not intended as racist.

From this perspective, what is called 'modern' or 'subtle' racism can be analysed in terms of identity management strategies to avoid accusations of racism (Billig et al., 1988). For example, Capdevila and Callaghan (2008) have shown how political rhetoric about immigration in Britain constructs racialised categories framed in a 'reasonable' discourse that appeals to common sense. Andreouli and Dashtipour (2014) have also shown that sustainability arguments are frequently used to counter accusations of prejudice in talk about immigration in the UK. Research by Hanson-Easey and

Augoustinos (2010) has shown that Australian political discourse is often based on a causal narrative which blames refugees for their inability to integrate. Mobilising this cause-and-effect relationship legitimates the exclusion of refugees whilst appearing to be rational and de-racialised. In an earlier study in the South African context, Lea (1996) found that white interviewees drew on a (psychological) discourse of biologism and cognitivism which naturalised ethnic differences but also allowed participants to appear rational and non-prejudiced.

In this paper, we theorise racism as a social construction that is both historically embedded ('big D') and negotiated in interaction with others ('small d') (see Condor, 2006a; Condor & Figgou, 2012). This suggests that the question of 'what racism is' is a matter of construction, re-construction, and contestation. Our starting point is that racism is not a single representation but rather, that the meanings of racism can vary according to the local and broader social contexts of discourse. To illustrate this, we present findings from mixed focus groups with secondary school students in a variety of locations in England. We explore how participants described, debated, and denied racism, and how these different discourses depended on the identity stakes involved in different interactional contexts. We pay specific attention to an 'end of racism' discourse that, unexpectedly, was particularly salient in our data.

### **Study background**

The data reported in this paper are part of a larger study on views about multiculturalism among staff and students in schools across England (Andreouli, Howarth & Sonn, 2014; Howarth & Andreouli, 2015). Schools are frequently targeted by government policies regarding cultural diversity and integration. For example, the Labour government's community cohesion agenda<sup>1</sup> targeted schools

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<sup>1</sup> Labour's community cohesion agenda followed the 2001 ethnic tensions in northern English towns (Bradford, Oldham and Burnley). A series of reports at the time suggested that the cause of the tensions was the lack of community cohesion. As a response, the then Labour government introduced a series of community cohesion policies. Part of these policies was the introduction of community cohesion as an assessment measure in school inspections.

alongside other policy areas (e.g., immigration). Against this background, this study took a bottom-up approach that sought to study students' and teachers' own views about multiculturalism. This paper draws specifically on the student data. The aim of the research was not to study social constructions of racism per se; however, racism was spontaneously brought up by participants in all the focus groups.

## **METHOD**

### *Sample*

Our aim in this study has been to achieve an in-depth understanding of the range of views with regards to cultural diversity in educational contexts. For this aim, we used purposive sampling. Participants were selected on the basis of their relevance to the research questions and the phenomenon under study (Flick, 2007).

The selection of research sites took place in two stages. Firstly, we identified three urban and rural areas of England to include in our study. We selected London, as an iconic multicultural city, urban and rural areas of Yorkshire in the north and rural Sussex in the south of the country. We anticipated that this geographical and urban-rural range would highlight different socio-demographic characteristics and different dynamics of intergroup relations. We were particularly interested in examining successful school activities on multiculturalism, so we approached schools which were seen as being particularly active in promoting discussions on cultural diversity, based on school inspection reports and other information from the schools' websites. We selected two schools in London, three in Yorkshire and one in Sussex.

The Yorkshire schools served areas of relatively low socio-economic status. The students in these schools were predominantly white British and Asian British. The two schools in London served predominantly black students from Caribbean and African backgrounds, again from relatively socially

and economically disadvantaged areas. Finally, the school from rural Sussex served a predominantly white British population of relatively high socio-economic status. Table 1 provides information on the socio-demographics of the participants in each focus group. Seventy-two students in total took part in the study. The students were in Years 8 to 10 (aged 12 - 14). Research has shown that at this age, young people have understandings of racism that are equivalent to adults': compared to younger children, they are much more aware of racism (McKown, 2004; McKown & Weinstein, 2003) and have been socialised into the norm against racism (De Franca, & Monteiro, 2013; Rutland, Brown, Cameron, Ahmavaara, Arnold, & Samson, 2007; Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

#### *Focus groups*

We conducted eleven focus groups in total. All focus groups were conducted by the first author. The composition of the focus groups was determined by our contact member of staff in each school, who had been asked to recruit students who were friends with each other and/or had taken part in cultural diversity activities in the school. The focus groups addressed the following three broad topics: views about multiculturalism in general, views about intercultural relations in the local community and in the school, and views about school practices relating to cultural diversity. In the beginning of each focus group, students were asked to individually complete a word association task with the word 'multiculturalism'. Answers to this task served as prompts for the discussion. Appendix 1 provides the topic guide that was used for the focus groups – however, this was a guide and not followed rigidly, following semi-structured interview conventions (Gaskell, 2000).

#### *Analytic approach*

The entire dataset was analysed using a discursively-oriented thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We analysed our data in terms of their content using a hierarchical scheme of themes, sub-

themes and basic codes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). One of the salient themes we identified in the analysis was racism. After collecting all extracts that referred explicitly to racism, and reading these several times to familiarise ourselves with the data, we identified key lines of argument and themes that allowed participants to make sense of racism in different ways (Augoustinos, 2009; Wetherell, 1998), and that were recurrent across the focus groups. Initial analysis was conducted by the first author and was later validated and expanded by the other two authors, through a peer-debriefing process in order to achieve consensus among researchers (Stiles, 1993).

We sought to explore both the content and functions of talk in light of the specific local community settings and the broader social norms shaping constructions of racism. In other words, we were interested in exploring both 'big' discourses (i.e., the broader normative framework) and 'small' discourses (i.e., the rhetorical functions of talk in specific interactional settings) (Gee, 1990). With regards to the latter, we considered the interactional features of each focus group (Wilkinson, 2004), such as the existing relations of the participants, the emerging group dynamics in the discussion, and the role of the interviewer (who is seen as white and non-British). Finally, we sought to ensure that our findings have 'reflexive validity' (Stiles, 1993), that is, that our interpretation of the data was open and reflective in a way that would allow us to expand our prior theoretical assumptions. As we show below, our findings both confirm existing research about the denial of racism and expand it, through an exploration of an 'end of racism' discourse that we identified in our data and through an analysis of how racism is negotiated in different social and interactional contexts.

## **ANALYSIS**

Racism was mentioned very frequently in the word association task that students completed in the beginning of the focus groups. About half of all students (approximately 45%) explicitly mentioned racism in this task. However, the importance of racism was minimised in most of the actual



discussions. Racism was, on the whole, 'othered': it was located in other places (e.g., London), other people (e.g., older people or extreme right-wing parties), or other times.

In the rural Sussex focus groups (where all our participants were white), comparisons with London were very common in discussions of ethnic and cultural diversity. Interestingly, comparisons with London could take one of two directions in these discussions: students either argued that there is *less* racism in London because there is more diversity, or they argued that there is *more* racism due to more diversity – but in both cases racism was constructed as having no direct relevance to the participants' own lives. The extract below follows a discussion about immigration where participants argue that there are very few migrants where they live compared to London (apart from 'Polish people at Tescos', 'Indians in the village shop' and 'Asians in a nearby town').

Extract 1: "You can't really be racist"

Interviewer: Do you think your life would be different [in London] in some way?

John<sup>2</sup>: You might look at things, you might look at things in a different way.

Andy: There's probably more racism there though, because there's like more chance to be racist.

Kayleigh: Yeah.

Interviewer: More opportunity for racism.

Kayleigh: You're more aware of stuff, because they're around you a lot too. You need to sort of know about all people, not them, but like something –

Interviewer: That's interesting. So you're saying that it makes you more aware but it could also potentially make you more racist?

Tim: Not more racist, but there'd be more –

Interviewer: More racism.

Kayleigh: There is more racism around.

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<sup>2</sup> All names of participants used in the paper are pseudonyms in order to preserve anonymity.

Tim: Yeah, because here you can't really be racist because there's not that many different races. Like to be racist here is –

John: Even if you go into Brighton there's, there's more but it's so much like different to London. You go to London and there's like so many different cultures and then Brighton's there's not many. There's a couple but there's not –

Kayleigh: Large amounts.

Tim: Yeah, you can't notice it.

Interviewer: Yeah. Why do you think that people, some people, are racist?

Tim: I don't know, quite a lot of old people are racist because of when they were brought up like – they were like-

John: My nan is racist [laughs]

Interviewer: Your nan. [John laughs] Why?

John: I don't think she knows she's doing it, but she [laughs]... different – you know what I mean.

Interviewer: Is it because of ignorance? Is that it or –

Tim: Probably people have different reasons, like different people.

Kayleigh: There's a lot more freedom now, so where back then there was a lot of 'this is the best' but you're minor and then they were brought up like that, but now there's a lot of freedom and there's a lot more equality, so everyone – so there's no... (FG7, Sussex)

In the extract above, London is initially introduced by students and then it is used by the interviewer as a way of engaging the participants into further discussion. The participants argue that there is 'more opportunity for racism' in London because there is more ethnic diversity there. Students argue that even in Brighton (the city closest to the school) you 'can't notice' different ethnicities. This way of talking about racism places racism outside of the realm of everyday life. Racism is constructed as irrelevant to them – it is something that affects Londoners but not the participants. Similar findings have been documented in the US where participants located racism in the South (Sommers & Norton, 2006). While previous literature has explored disclaimers of the type 'I'm not racist, but' (e.g.,

Augoustinos & Every, 2007) as a means of managing accountability, here we have a complete negation of racism, so that accusations of racism are not just denied but rendered impossible.

The interviewer's question 'why are some people racist?' seems to invite a more personalised discussion (the question is about 'racist' people, not racism generally) about the origins of racism. Tim and other members of the group respond by invoking another comparison, this time between the present and the past, whereby racism is constructed as a thing of the past. We describe this as an 'end of racism' discourse, which worked to downplay the existence and severity of racism in their local communities and in Britain in general. Comments like 'I don't think that racism is that bad anymore' (FG5) were common in our data. That 'old people are racist' was also a very common argument (see also Sommers & Norton, 2006) and was one of the central elements of the 'end of racism' discourse.

John brings this general discussion about racism in the past closer to his own experiences by saying that his grandmother is racist. This comment is delivered with laughter, which serves to minimise its severity. In the last couple of turns, Tim and Kayleigh are responding to the interviewer's further probing and attempt to 'save' John from a potentially awkward position. In this account, it was historical and paternalistic structures that made people racist, while now there is more freedom and equality. This argument works in two ways. First, it suggests that the structures that supported racism are gone, and by implication, so is racism. Second, it suggests that people who were brought up in these environments cannot be blamed if they are racist. As Condor (2006b) has shown, the narrative of 'national diversification', whereby diversity and tolerance are constructed as historical achievements of the British nation, is a common 'big' discourse in England.

#### Extract 2: "We get accused of being racist"

Anna: What I think is a bit strange though is, I don't wanna sound like racist 'cause I'm not, but when you see like an actual like black person and a white, I just think it's not... Like I don't know how to explain it because

say a black person moved next door to me, it just feels the same. I don't know why. But say if an Asian person moved in, I wouldn't like have a thing, but I would be shocked that they're not in their own community, like they're not in Bradford or...

Adil: Yeah like...

Interviewer: It would seem odd.

Anna: It would seem a bit odd that they have moved next door to me because it's not an Asian community. But if a black person moved in I wouldn't even think any differently. It would just be normal.

Interviewer: What do others think about that?

Adil: I moved to [mentions location], it's been two years now and it took them like about a month to start talking to us

Interviewer: It took your neighbours about a month?

Adil: Yeah.

Interviewer: Why was that?

Adil: I don't know. They probably felt like, oh, we've never mixed with them before, I wonder if they can talk our language or whatever. Like that. They've got a lot of stuff to think about like, will they even wanna talk to us...

Anna: Yeah, which just goes through you mind.

Lilly: I think it's weird. Like you just got to this stage now, when you started talking and you were like, I don't wanna sound racist. We get accused of being racist [Anna: Yeah] whatever we're saying about a different culture.

Anna: When I'm talking about cultures and stuff like that, I need to watch what I'm saying.

(FG6, Yorkshire)

The extract above follows a discussion about the concentration of Asian communities in specific parts of the participants' locality. Anna's early use of the 'I don't want to sound racist...but' formulation can be understood as a rhetorical technique that allows Anna to say something that she anticipates could be problematic (Augoustinos & Every, 2010; van Dijk, 1992). In addition, however, Anna also prefaces her comments about Asians with 'say a black person moved next door to me, it just feels the same'.

There is no logical reason why not being racist with one group would inoculate Anna against an accusation of racism against another group, unless there is a shared understanding that racism is located in the identity or reputation of the actor. Our interpretation is that Anna is making a reputational claim. She is claiming an identity as a reasonable (not racist) person by appealing to a shared understanding within the group, and specifically the understanding that there is a particular kind of person who is a racist. This enables her to insist that her attitude to an Asian neighbour lies in the behaviour of Asians rather than racism per se. Adil's turn ('yeah, like...') suggests that she was successful with this appeal.

A few lines later, Anna's disclaimer is picked up by Lilly. The use of 'we' in Lilly's utterance seems to refer to white people who are presented as the victims of what is commonly discussed as 'political correctness'. Lilly is using an extreme case formulation ('we get accused ...whatever we're saying') to make this point. There are two social norms being oriented to in this extract: the norm against prejudice and the norm of free speech. As has also been shown in asylum seeker debates (Goodman & Burke, 2010), the norm of free speech can be drawn upon to argue against the anti-prejudice norm (which is constructed as stifling debate and openness). Ideologically, this discursive strategy functions to blame ethnic minorities for being easily offended by benign comments.

The groups being juxtaposed in the extract are Asian and white British – indeed, Anna's initial comment positions Asian British against white and black British people. The group dynamics are worth reflecting upon here. In particular, it is interesting that Adil, one of the Asian British boys in the group, offers his support to everything that is being said in this exchange by his white peers, and in the presence of a white researcher. When he describes his experience of when his family first moved to a white-dominated area, he attributes his neighbours' behaviour to a few possible reasons, none of them related to issues of prejudice or discrimination. Rather, the possible reasons cited have to do with white people's fear that Asians would not 'talk our language'. In other words, Adil is reproducing

the dominant discourse that constructs Asians as different and potentially problematic while positioning whites as normal and reasonable.

In this focus group and in others, we found such instances whereby ethnic minority pupils would 'side with' ethnic majority pupils when the talk of the latter could be read as insensitive towards ethnic minorities. As other research has shown (e.g., Mott & Condor, 1997; Wilkins, 2014) minority individuals, particularly in contexts where the majority 'voice' is more dominant and salient (like in this focus group), may be concerned to not be seen as 'troublemakers' by making a 'big deal' out of benign comments. But there are further identity stakes involved in disagreeing with the group here. By avoiding reference to racism and by partaking in the dominant discourse against political correctness, Adil is challenging a 'victim vs. perpetrator' intergroup positioning. Thus, he is able to deconstruct the 'us(white)/them(Asian)' dichotomy and distance himself from a stigmatised (c.f. Dunn, 2005) victim identity.

### Extract 3: "The BNP is racist"

Amneet: To be honest, I know this sounds really bad, but I think everyone is actually racist. It does get to that point where there is a line that everybody is racist. I don't think no one is not racist in the world.

Khalida: I don't think it's racism.

Interviewer: Why is everyone racist?

Amneet: Right, I don't think, there is a point, it gets to a point where people will think differently and they will say something what may offend a different race.

Lina: The words.

Interviewer: The words.

Lina: It's just general words but people take them offensively so obviously -

Interviewer: So it's the same thing that was mentioned earlier, that people get offended easily.

Khalida: Intention's not wrong it's just the way people take it.

Lina: I don't even think it's racism; I don't think it's racist. I just think -

Interviewer: What makes someone racist?

Khalida: If they're intentionally doing it.

Maher: The BNP is racist. The EDL.

Interviewer: The EDL and BNP are racist?

Amneet: But they're just putting their point across of what they are doing so they are political but they go about it-

Maher: The wrong way.

Amneet: Yeah, in the wrong way. (FG1, Yorkshire)

The participants of this focus group are a mixed-ethnicity friendship group of girls. The extract above is another example of a conversation that works on the boundaries of racist/not racist. All the participants locate racism in what people say, but disagree on who is to blame. The extract starts with Amneet's argument that everyone is racist (which is provided as a reason for the lack of mixing within the school's friendship groups). This then leads to a discussion where participants co-construct and negotiate attributions of racism. Amneet suggests that racism originates in the 'perpetrator' (who may say something offensive), while Khalinda and Lina suggest that racism originates in the oversensitivity of the 'victims' (perhaps also aided by the interviewer's question 'why is everyone racist?' that may have been understood as a challenge to Amneet's statement).

In order to establish what is racism and what is not racism, Khalinda draws on a commonly used distinction between an act or an attitude than could be conceived as racist and 'real' racism (Verkuyten, 1998) on the basis of intention (van Dijk, 1992; see also Swim, Scott, Sechrist, Campbell, & Stangor, 2003), while Lina denies racism altogether. In an effort to define racism in a clear manner and responding to the interviewer's persistence as to 'what makes someone racist', Maher shifts the discussion from modern and relatively benign racism (where people 'think differently') to old-fashioned racism. Racism is constructed as so morally reprehensible (Billig et al., 1988) that it could only come from exceptionally prejudiced individuals or groups of people, such as the BNP (British

National Party) or the EDL (English Defence League) (two extreme right-wing organisations in Britain, mainly known for their nationalist, anti-immigration, and Islamophobic views). This is an example of ‘othering’: mobilising an extreme case formulation that pushes racism to the margins of everyday experience and far away from the participants.

Displacing racism from the realm of everyday life allows people, particularly members of minority groups, to construct their community as a welcoming and accommodating place (Wilkins, 2012) – this may be particularly relevant to a mixed-ethnicity friendship group within a context that is perceived by the students as being largely segregated into whites and Asians. However, this ‘othering’ of racism does not quite work in this extract: when taken up by the interviewer (‘the EDL and BNP are racist?’), Amneet and Maher work collaboratively to argue that the actions of the BNP and EDL might be ‘the wrong way’, but their political intentions render even these groups ‘not racist’. In this stretch of talk racism is initially constructed as very common (‘everyone is racist’) but then it is progressively constructed as rare, so that only extremist beliefs or acts fall within the scope of racism. In this regard, it is interesting to note that Amneet’s initial statement is prefaced with a disclaimer (‘I know this sounds really bad, but’). Instead of disclaiming racism, this formulation is used here for the opposite purpose: to claim that racism is very common indeed. Making a claim of racism thus appears to be as difficult and risky as making a claim of no racism (see Goodman, 2010; see also extract 6 below).

#### Extract 4: “They don’t understand that you’re just joking around”

Maggie: Like for example like with Chinese people they say, oh Chinese people can’t see properly because they’ve got like squinty eyes, which obviously, if you’re friends with a Chinese person it’s a joke. But then people actually just say that in a racist way also. They just like take...

Carrie: Obviously your friend will like think it’s a joke but if someone else like hears it and they don’t really know you, they’ll probably take it serious [sic] because they don’t understand that you’re just joking around.

Interviewer: Okay, some jokes could be racist and some jokes are –

Sharon: I think they’re hiding the fact that it’s racist by turning it into a little joke.



Interviewer: They're hiding the fact that it's racist by turning it into a joke okay. Are all jokes racist?

Lana: No not really.

Interviewer: What does it depend on?

Sharon: Friendship, I think. Joking around with your friends then yeah.

Carrie: The way you put it.

Maggie: If you mean it aggressively, then yeah it's racist. (FG9, London)

The above extract is drawn from a mixed-ethnicity focus group in a London school whose population is mainly of ethnic minority heritage (predominantly black). The quote is extracted from a longer discussion where the students agree that racism is diminishing in Britain and London in particular. In the beginning of the extract, Maggie and Carrie collaboratively construct the meaning of racism in relation to interpersonal relationships: jokes which could be conceived as racist in other contexts, are not racist in the context of an exchange among friends. Sharon challenges this view by arguing that joking is still masked racism, but this point is not pursued further by the group. Rather, Sharon, Carrie and Maggie work collaboratively to make a distinction between well-intentioned (and thus justifiable) jokes among friends, and aggressive racism by non-friends. This distinction was very common across the dataset. This returns us to the use of intention as a key criterion for distinguishing between racist/not-racist, but using an intention of aggression rather than an intention to be racist per se. The distinction between 'racism-proper' and friendly joking further strengthens the end of racism discourse as it suggests that jokes which could potentially be understood as racist, are not 'really' racist (Billig, 2001). Defining racism in terms of the relationship between the actors also undermines the legitimacy of third parties who might call out racism in practice. Carrie argues that a stranger would not be qualified to define an act as racist because 'they don't really know you'. Specifically, a stranger is not aware of the relationships involved and therefore does not have access to the information necessary to discount racism on the basis of existing friendships and well-intentioned jokes.

Extract 5: "Some people do think it's a joke don't they?"

Interviewer: Why do you girls think that it [racism] is common [referring to an earlier comment]?

Natalie: I think 'cause, like no matter where you go there's still gonna be someone, like even though if they're saying on the TV or whatever that, oh, racism is bad and stuff, you still have these people who like they just don't listen, and then you still get like racist people. And no matter what you just can't stop it 'cause that's, we're just human and we always do something wrong.

[Steph raises her hand to indicate that she wants to speak]

Interviewer: Steph, what do you think?

Steph: They also, I don't think they, the person who is racist, I don't think they're kind of racist I think they kind of find it as a joke.

Interviewer: As a joke?

Steph: And they don't really think that it's personal, but it kind of is, 'cause they're just judging you and what you are. And also it's not common-common, but it is common, 'cause even though they're not saying something to you, they're saying, like they're thinking something and if they do say it then...

Natalie: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, so it could be a joke?

Steph: Yeah, some people do think it's a joke don't they?

Interviewer: To say things that other people would find offensive?

Steph: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Claudia: Like there's like, I heard like jokes and stuff where people, they like try to copy the accents of different people from different countries.

Interviewer: As a joke?

Claudia: Like as a joke, but it really isn't. (FG10, London)

The extract above follows the initial word association task with the word 'multiculturalism' in one of our London mixed-ethnicity focus groups. One of the associated words, as in many of the focus groups, was 'racism'. This served as a stimulus for further discussion on this topic, including the issue of

whether racism is common and to which the interviewer returns in the beginning of this extract. In response to the question, Natalie orients to the norm against racism but argues that it is ineffective in eliminating racism. On the contrary, she constructs racism not only as common but as universal and inevitable (people 'will always do something wrong'). In this account, racism appears as a real problem (it is not discounted), but it is also normalised as natural. Steph however is more ambivalent. On the one hand, Steph makes reference to 'mundane' everyday manifestations of racism (i.e., jokes), thus broadening the scope of actions that can be construed as racism compared to what we saw in previous extracts. On the other hand, Steph also suggests that because they see it as a joke, the 'perpetrators' are not racist or at least do not intend to be racist (seeing it as a joke is mobilised as a deficit in understanding rather than an intention to get away with racism). This relates to the idea of reputation. Because Steph is using 'racist' as a noun that defines someone's identity ('I don't think that they, the person who is racist, I don't think they're kind of racist') rather than someone's actions, she struggles to call people racist as that would damage their reputation. However, she comes back to the idea that racism is in fact common (if not 'common-common') because (racist) people 'are just judging you and what you are'. Immediately, however, she narrows down the range of events that can be understood as racist by making a distinction between what people think and what people actually say, suggesting that it is only explicit talk or action that constitutes racism. Finally, following the interviewer's further questioning about jokes, the participants reach consensus that such talk may be seen a joke by those telling it, but it really is not.

It is worth noting that, in contrast to previous extracts, participants in this extract describe racism in terms of actions due to people's ignorance (they 'don't listen' and 'don't really think that it is personal'), rather than their intention. Furthermore, in contrast to the previous extracts and to the majority of our data, racism here is not seen as a marginal, rare occurrence but rather as common and personally relevant. Everyday micro-aggressions (Essed, 1991; Sue, 2010), such as racially offensive jokes, potentially fall within the scope of racism. This may reflect the fact that the students taking part

in this focus group were from ethnic minority and mixed backgrounds, so they might have encountered instances of discrimination in their own lives as some literature suggests (e.g., Inman & Baron, 1996). However, although participants are fairly clear that these kinds of experiences are common, they negotiate the extent to which they are racist and excusable through references to ignorance and common humanity. This attempt to present a 'moderate' account of racism can be understood as an effort to avoid looking oversensitive or unreasonable in making a claim of racism (see also extract 3). On the whole, however, we did find that students in London schools were somewhat more reflective about the origins and the facets of racism and exhibited 'sociological imagination' (see Figgou & Condor, 2006): understanding racism as a broader phenomenon that goes beyond explicit and overt racism, as the extract below shows.

Extract 6: "You don't deserve to be in such a rich environment"

Adanna: Sometimes I think it's kind of like because there's a bad side to it because, like, some people are stereotyped as being [over-speaking]

Interviewer: Sorry, what was that?

Adanna: I don't know how to say this, I'm gonna try, I'm gonna say it in the best way possible. Pakistanians are sometimes stereotyped as P-A-K-I. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Interviewer: Yes.

Adanna: And like, if you go to somewhere like Tooting and or if you go to somewhere like, if you're a black person and you're seen in Selfridges the security guard will follow you around because you're black and it's a thing called [unclear], or if you're a different race they don't expect you to be as high class because you're classed as this certain race so you don't deserve to be in such a rich environment. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do other people feel like that?

All: Yeah.

Kainda: One time I walked into a shop, this is like in the summer time so I was a bit darker and my friend was like really, really white. And we walked into this shop together and they started to follow us and then when we separated they started to follow me not my friend. They didn't worry about her, just me. And I was also with a

black girl that came with me as well and like they normally follow the black people and then when the black people say “ah, why are you following me?” they kick you out the store. So... (FG11, London).

The extract above is again drawn from the discussion following the word association task in the beginning of this mixed-ethnicity focus group in London. In the word association task, the words ‘different’ and ‘unique’ were mentioned and soon the discussion turned to the negative aspects of difference, i.e. stereotyping. Adanna uses the very common (in Britain) example of stereotyping against Pakistani people. The interviewer offers support to Adanna’s point which gives her room to elaborate further, this time using her personal experiences (evidenced by the use of the personal pronoun ‘you’) as a young black person in London. Adanna mobilises her experience to talk about the social and economic dimensions of stereotyping. The use of the ‘if...then’ formulation allows Adanna to construct a causal relationship between ethnicity and disadvantage. In stark contrast to the extracts presented earlier, Adanna reflects on the intersection of class and ethnic prejudice in Britain which disadvantages black people (“you’re classed as this certain race so you don’t deserve to be in such a rich environment”). So here the emphasis is on broader social relations, and racism is discussed in terms of its effects on social justice.

The interviewer’s further prompting raises agreement by the rest of the group and Kainda, a mixed-ethnicity student, corroborates Adanna’s narrative by recounting her own story of discrimination in an encounter with a shop’s security guard. The fact that Kainda makes no reference to personal intentions, but suggests that the reason she was being followed by the guard was her skin colour, alludes to discrimination as a structural (not interpersonal) phenomenon. What is interesting about Kainda’s account is that she uses a very concrete and detailed story (time of year, being darker, being with her friends one of whom is white and one who is black) in an effort to make a waterproof claim about an experience of racism. Having two friends is necessary for making such an argument because she can show that the discrimination she experienced is about being black (because they did not follow

the white friend) and not something personal to her (because they followed her other friend who was also black). Her narrative resembles psychological quasi-experimental designs for establishing cause-and-effect relationships. As Augoustinos and Every (2010) observe, calling out racism is easily dismissed though the use of racism denial tropes (c.f. van Dijk, 1992), such as the 'end of racism' discourse. Indeed, Augoustinos and Every (2010) reviewed literature which shows that anti-racists are constructed negatively, for example as demagogues or elites. Ethnic minorities are further shown to be particularly reluctant to call out discrimination in order to avoid reputational damage (e.g., Wilkins, 2012). In line with these observations, Kainda seems to be orienting to the risk of making a claim of racism, and she is generating the strongest account that she can to counter the prevalent discourse of the end of racism.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this paper, we have explored how 'what racism is' is a matter of construction, re-construction and contestation, within focus groups among students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds in English secondary schools in Yorkshire, Sussex and London. We have sought to explore both the content and functions of talk in light of the specific local community settings and the broader social norms shaping constructions of racism. In contrast to previous prototype research (e.g., Inman & Baron, 1996), we suggest that 'racism' is a socially constructed system of representation.

In this final section of the paper, we discuss the contribution of our study. Certainly, our findings are not easily generalizable to other local contexts as the particularities of the schools and localities that we selected helped produce these particular data. However, insights from this study can be used to inform research on constructions of racism both on a theoretical and on an empirical level.

On a theoretical level, our analysis suggests that in order to understand the ways in which racism is constructed, we need to pay close attention to different levels of analysis: societal/ideological, local

community and micro-interactional. It is the interplay of norms, social identities, relational dynamics and rhetorical concerns that produces racism as a complex social construction. While studies on constructions of racism have tended to focus on either 'small d' or 'big D' discourses (Gee, 1990), we argue that in order to explore both the pervasiveness of discourses around racism and their particular nuances in different contexts, we need to study them at the intersection of micro and macro levels of analysis. On a macro level ('big D'), these discourses serve ideological functions (such as silencing minoritised perspectives), while on a micro level ('small d'), they serve rhetorical functions (such as positive self-presentation) in accordance with specific interactional dynamics. We further argue that this integrated focus on social norms, local contexts and interactional dynamics can help highlight the ways in which constructions of racism appear to be both pervasive and relatively open to contestation. On the one hand, they are based on and reflect established social norms, such as the norm against prejudice (Billig et al., 1988) and the 'end of racism' discourse that we identified in this study. On the other hand, they are dynamic and co-constructed in tangible social interactions and within specific local contexts.

On an empirical level, our findings extend previous research on the norm against prejudice (Billig et al., 1988). In our data, we found that racism was constructed in variable ways: it was commonly individualised (i.e., constructed as the result of personal shortcomings) (see Figgou & Condor, 2006; Howarth, 2009; Sapountzis & Vikka, in press). However, it was also discussed in terms of social structures and social relations. For instance, 'outdated' social structures were sometimes blamed for the existence of racism in the past and its legacy into the present. What seems to bind all these different ways of constructing racism together is the finding that racism was predominantly 'othered' in the talk of the students. By 'othered', we mean that racism was positioned as something abnormal, irrational, and distant – in a similar way that 'othered' social groups are positioned as different from 'us'. When discussing racism in contemporary Britain, participants were careful to position it on the margins of normality and everyday experience: racism was 'othered' historically, generationally, and

geographically. With regards to the former, racism was constructed as a thing of the past. As such, it was the older generation that was more readily constructed as racist due to ignorance and being raised within an 'outdated' normative and structural system. Furthermore, racism was 'othered' geographically: it was located in other places, such as London (e.g., in our Sussex focus groups).

This 'othering' of racism seems to point to a broader discourse about 'post-racialism' (see Carbado & Gulati, 2013) or 'the end of racism'. The phrase 'the end of racism' has previously been used by the American conservative author D'Souza in his 1995 book of the same title. The book presents an attack on liberal antiracism and has been heavily criticised by anti-racists and social scientists alike. In the book it is argued that racism has diminished and that it no longer disadvantages ethnic minorities. Rather, D'Souza argues, the difficulties facing African Americans (the 'black underclass', as he puts it) today are the result of 'cultural pathologies' within these communities, not racism. It is no surprise that this book has received considerable critique. We do not suggest that the accounts of our participants coincide with the views presented in this very controversial book. However, there seem to be common themes in the ways that racism is described in these quite different contexts. From our perspective, this shows that the broader 'end of racism' discourse, as we have described it here, seems to be part of everyday ways of thinking about racism, at least in the sample that we studied. It is, therefore, not just a minority controversial position. This discourse renders both racism and anti-racism irrelevant to contemporary societies, thus defusing and derailing a debate about racism (see also Harries, 2014).

Participants employed different discourses in different ways in our data depending on the local and broader social context. We found, for instance, that colour-blind norms were quite salient in Yorkshire and Sussex (when compared to London). Yorkshire, in particular, has been the target of intense media and political attention due to stereotypes of segregation and cultural isolation. Partly as a result of this normative pressure, 'mixing' (meaning socialising with students from different ethnic, religious



and cultural backgrounds) was very often mentioned as something that students should do. As a corollary of this, participants in Sussex and Yorkshire (both ethnic majority *and* ethnic minority) often discounted racism. The commonest argument used was making a distinction between violent blatant racism and 'benign' well-intentioned acts which are mistakenly construed as racism (c.f. Swim et al., 2003; Verkuyten, 1988). For ethnic minority pupils, 'siding with' the views expressed by white peers and discounting racism may be an effort to position themselves as part of the majority and/or avoid a victim identity. This can be an important identity stake, particularly in the context of a focus group discussion where the 'white majority voice' appeared to be more pronounced (like in our Yorkshire groups) and in the presence of a moderator who was seen as white. We suggest, therefore, that it is not just the accusation of being called racist that students oriented to, but also the accusation of being 'troublemakers' who called out racism and disrupted the norms of being 'good team players' in the context of these schools.

In contrast, students in London more often made claims for the commonality of racism and extended the definition of racism to include a wider range of acts. This may be partly because these focus groups were more ethnically mixed and the dynamics between majorities-minorities were more balanced. Further, the research was conducted in South London which has a history of protest against racism – so in this case, local community identities may be mobilised to both make racism more visible and act against it (Howarth, 2002). However, even in the cases where students argued about the commonality of racism, they struggled to construct a watertight formulation that would allow them to make these claims. They employed a 'lay experimental' method to support their argument in a way that cannot be easily refuted or discounted (as in extract 6). Participants were therefore not only concerned to present themselves as non-racist but also to appear as non-anti-racist, as explained above.

These findings across different locations and group compositions can be explained in terms of the participants orienting to the norm against prejudice (Billig et al., 1988) and seeking to avoid

reputational damage (both for themselves and for their local communities and schools). This has been well-documented in previous research (e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2010). However, our study extends this research and provides some rather unexpected findings, in a way that also enhances the reflexive validity (Stiles, 1993) of this research. While racism disclaimers have been primarily interpreted in terms of the norm against prejudice in western societies, our data show that this norm may have changed or expanded: it is not just a norm against racism per se but a norm against the existence of racism altogether. The pervasiveness of the 'end of racism' discourse, instantiated in talk that 'otherises' racism in our data, shows a possible normative change from seeing racism as morally reprehensible to seeing racism as a thing of the past. To conclude, we suggest, therefore, that future research explores further not only denials of racism as rhetorical strategies in micro-interactions, but the end of racism as a broader normative discourse and its effects for interethnic relations and equality.

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