



Challenging racism in public spaces: Practices for interventions into disputes

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ABSTRACT

In everyday life we may hear someone being racist or saying something otherwise objectionable in a public space. Calling out that person for being discriminatory is generally regarded as morally imperative, yet it is evidently very difficult to do so when one is outside of an ongoing conversation. This article maps some interactional practices overhearers use to enter an ongoing dispute in which there is evident racism. We show how interveners design and time their turns at talk to take a stance against some racism oriented to as egregious or disruptive whilst walking the accountability tightrope. That is, we analyse their efforts to remain 'outside' of the dispute and not accountable for their entry. By documenting the design and timing of an intervener's turns, we argue against using a participation framework approach to track participation, and contend that challenging racism, despite one's moral obligation to do so, requires careful coordination between the disputants, overhearers, and the intervener.

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1. Introduction

Methods for entering an interaction are well documented, from how interlocutors formulate the previous activity for newcomers (Pillet-Shore, 2010) to how bystanders achieve effective interventions (Ran and Huang, 2019). In this paper we scrutinise the methods bystanders use to intervene into disputes when challenging racism in public spaces. We examine disputes in public spaces (e.g., the bus/train, a parking lot, the street) between interlocutors seemingly unknown to one another. Examining naturally occurring disputes that occur in public spaces offers insights into a moment of social life that has been hitherto underexplored (but see Reynolds, 2015; Joyce, 2022; Joyce and Walz, 2022; Sterphone, 2022)—these disputes evince a repertoire of interactional practices and methods that members use to make sense of the world and others around them. Our analysis centres those practices that are used as a bystander intervenes in an ongoing dispute.

The present paper uses Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA) supported by Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) to investigate naturally occurring interventions into ongoing disputes. We use CA to examine the sequential organisation of interventions whilst MCA supports our analysis of what members use categories and categorisation to do across the trajectory of an intervention. Recent interest in the systematic language practices of bystander interventions has concentrated on the

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¹ Author order is alphabetical and does not reflect that this was a truly collaborative effort throughout the entire process.

exercising of authority (Ran and Huang, 2019), the triggering of interventions (Kádár and Márquez-Reiter, 2015), and attitudes triggered by an intervention (Kádár and de la Cruz, 2016). In the same vein, there has been a recent expansion in literature exploring (practices for) the uptake of (hearably) racist talk by recipients of such talk or invited recipients, like callers to a radio show (see, for example, Whitehead, 2018, 2020). We explore the intersection of these burgeoning areas of research, examining practices for intervening in public disputes about racialised and (hearably) racist encounters. We first begin with a review of interactional research on disputative encounters, interpreting racism from an ethnomethodological perspective and finally, previous work on interventions.

2. Public disputes, racism, and interventions

2.1. Disputes

Disputes are characterised by disagreement between parties, which occurs when speakers' views differ from those expressed by other speakers (Sifianou, 2012; Drew, 1998; Goodwin, 1980; Schmitt and Márquez-Reiter, 2019). Early work by M.H. Goodwin (e.g. 1980) on children's disputes set the groundwork for future studies examining disputative interactions. More recent ethnomethodological studies building on Goodwin's pioneering work by Reynolds (2015) and others (Reynolds and Fitzgerald, 2015; Joyce, 2022; Joyce and Walz, 2022; Sterphone, 2022), have focused on disputes in public (e.g., radio, the street, public transit, etc.) that involve two or more participants unknown to one another and available to onlookers/overhearers. The typical focus of these studies has been how strangers (re)produce themselves as "agent(s) of social order" by enacting control over others (Reynolds, 2015:14) and the lengths interlocutors go to so as to preserve disputative sequences (Joyce, 2022; Joyce and Walz, 2022; Sterphone, 2022).

The common interest across most if not all research on disputative interactions lies in how behaviour is formulated as transgressive by interlocutors (Ran and Huang, 2019) and, conversely, the difficulty in imposing one's assessment of that behaviour and how calling out someone for, e.g., discrimination as itself antagonistic and accountable (van Dijk, 1992; Joyce et al., 2021). Now, while the present investigation is not exactly concerned with how prior spates of talk are characterised as discriminatory (cf. Joyce et al., 2021), this characterisation is necessarily important for the sequences we investigate. That is, prior behaviour is or comes to be characterised as racist via a disputant's turn or the intervention itself.

2.2. Racism

How behaviour is constituted as racist (or any other -ist) is as much a problem that is managed locally by disputants as by interveners. CA work on responses to -isms in interaction (Robles, 2015; Whitehead and Stokoe, 2015; Whitehead, 2018; Joyce et al., 2021; Zhang and Okazawa, 2022; see also, discussion in Whitehead et al., 2018) take up both the complexities of managing the moral implicatures of accusations of such conduct, as well as how members targeted by these accusations resist being categorised as such. For example, Whitehead et al.'s situation-sensitive study of the "risk factors" of emerging violent interactions demonstrate that and how participants orient to race/ism as potentially constituting a normative push toward violent confrontation when one is targeted by racist utterances (p. 333). Robles and Shrikant's (2021) marvellous review of interactional approaches to discrimination and racism in everyday life highlights just how useful examining racism through an interactional lens can be. Notably, they discuss the erasure and denial of racism through acts like reframing utterances as 'not racist' and how "white" categories are considered 'neutral', 'normal', or unspoken, and are thus, as Whitehead and Lerner (2009) note, practically asymmetric. Owing to the variety of discursive resources interlocutors might employ to disclaim racist conduct, as Robles and Shrikant (2021) examine, not all instances of racist conduct are easily identifiable as such. Indeed, as Stokoe (2012) has demonstrated—and Whitehead (2020) developed—members may hide behind a shield of ambiguity when producing "-ist" talk to stave off allegations of being racist when producing abhorrent sentiments. The shield, or more accurately the purported 'intentionality' of the sentiments, renders the talk more difficult to both identify and call out.

2.3. Interventions

Policing disputants' behaviour is a feature of interventions and depicts how interveners make sense of, and evaluate that behaviour (Ran and Huang, 2019). In public disputes the omnirelevant device—that is, how participants are *always* potentially categorisable in the current activity (see Fitzgerald et al., 2009; Joyce, 2022; Joyce and Walz, 2022; Sterphone, 2022)—is available to make sense of everyone in the local environment. For instance, those actively engaged in the dispute (e.g. disputants, opponents), and those passively engaged in the dispute (e.g. overhearers, audience, camera operators (see Goffman, 1981; Sacks, 1992)). Intervenors occupy a liminal position: through making an intervention they move from being passively engaged, as an overhearer who has made sense of the dispute to warrant their involvement, to being actively engaged in a way that they oppose an individual or the dispute itself. The present paper considers the liminal role that interlocutors play upon intervening in a dispute and how they "take a side", affiliate with a side, remain exogenous to the dispute, and how these

interlocutors are accountable for their intervention. Interventions, as we call them, are unique in their character as they describe ways that “outsiders” (Kendon, 1977) ‘break in’ to an ongoing encounter—which in our cases is often to sanction or mediate parties to a dispute.

Over the course of a disputative encounter, members engage in ‘trajectories of engagement’ that make their relevant categorisation as disputants, interactants, participants, overhearers etc. contingent and shifting. That is, a given member’s relevant situational identity (Zimmerman, 1998) is a function, in part, of how their action engages them in an (ongoing) interaction as well as how they and other members orient to this engagement (e.g., as joining, leaving, participating, etc.). That categorisation and action are mutually contingent and flexible in this way is, of course, a fundamental feature of categorisation (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2001; Joyce, 2022; Joyce and Walz, 2022; Sterphone, 2022). Goffman (1981) conceived ‘participation frameworks’ to map how participants might be variously held together, which Kerrison (2018:146) describes as “a social situation can stretch as far as there is at least the possibility of mutual perception”. However, and as Kerrison points out, ‘participation frameworks’ place speaker intention as central and describe participants in terms of their ratification into the conversation. This is an ill-fitted understanding for ethnomethodology, which treats all parties as potentially equally and continuously important. We thus propose that a focus on categorisation practices or members’ shifting deployments of ‘who-we-are’ and ‘what-we’re-doing’ (Butler et al., 2009) has a more appropriate analytic orientation for tracking members’ roles in the encounters and importantly, how these are treated by others. Consequently, Goffman’s participation framework complicates discussion of the phenomena in question, due to member’s shifting identifiability, both locally and analytically, vis-à-vis these situational identities (Zimmerman, 1998) which can be revealed by closer attention to categorisation.

Of course, this is not to say that an ethnomethodologically-informed and categorisation-focused approach is a panacea to these concerns, but rather, the impetus to attend not only to the descriptive adequacy of any given category, but of ‘the relevance of that term relative to the [many] alternative terms that are demonstrably available’ (Schegloff, 1992: 108). To ‘naively’, as Sacks (1992) put it, rely on characterisations of persons, and thus a proposed relationship to an interaction and/or others within it, without a warrant for their relevance grounded in participants’ orientations would be to simply take for granted that some aspect of ‘social structure’ is entering into some aspect of conduct and interaction. Relatedly, the possible relevance of some category and its associated common-sense knowledge is, itself, not sufficient for us as analysts: i.e., does this category and its invoked ‘context’ aid in understanding, analysing, and providing an account of how and why the interaction has unfolded in the way that it did (Schegloff, 1992: 113)? These concerns, rearticulated by Schegloff and integrated into the foundations of Sacks’ early CA investigations, are not similarly prioritised when applying the ‘participation frameworks’ conception, which provides for a disjuncture between the ethnomethodological foundations of CA—i.e., a focus on participants’ orientations—and Goffman’s concept. For the sake of legibility throughout, though, we have flattened some of the categorial variance that emerges during the ‘trajectories of engagement’ we analyse below, which we engage further in the discussion, and refer to members based on the salient categorisation(s) displayed by the members for and in the analysed clip.

3. Data and method

This project draws on naturally occurring interactions in US and UK English. The data were originally collected as part of Jack’s doctoral dissertation for the purpose of examining disputative interactions more generally (see Joyce, 2020 for a full account of their dataset) with all the clips found on publicly available accounts on social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Twitter). We supplemented these data with video clips found following the same parameters.² Our data constitutes what Jones and Raymond (2012) called “opportunistic third-party video”, a method for data collection increasingly used among conversation analysts (see, for example, Whitehead et al., 2018). The data for this paper were selected with the criteria that it featured a speaker entering an ongoing dispute in a public space, retained the sequential and temporal properties of the interaction, and is not scripted. We narrowed our criteria to instances where race becomes, or is already, salient for the interlocutors.³

Each extract demonstrates the methods used by participants to handle an intervention as it occurs naturally in social interaction. We transcribed the data using the Jeffersonian and Mondadian transcription systems developed for CA, which captures the sequential embodied aspects of interaction (Hepburn and Bolden, 2017; Mondada, 2018). We display these extracts alongside figures to show the configuration of participants in the physical space and/or embodied conduct relevant to the intervention. To analyse the data, we used CA supported by MCA, both introduced by Sacks (1992) to identify sequential and categorial practices that feature in interventions into disputes. Using naturally occurring video- or audio-recordings, CA examines how interlocutors construct a mutual understanding of ongoing activities, form regularities in the patterns of their joint activities and display orientation to interactional norms (Sidnell and Stivers, 2013). MCA focuses on how identities,

² The recordings can be found via (Joyce et al., 2022): Link omitted for double-blind review.

³ Please note that the extracts include instances of explicit racism and reader discretion is advised.

statuses, and categorisation practices are deployed in talk-in-interaction (Hester and Eglin, 1997). With CA and MCA we analyse the sequential organisation of talk and peoples' reasoning practices in orientations to and by interveners and how these are handled during disputes.

4. Analysis

In the ensuing analysis, we discuss how participants demonstrate orientations to a dispute as accountable and potentially sanctionable and follow this with two practices interlocutors use to intervene into disputes. The first collection features cases where disputants hold interveners accountable for interfering in their ongoing dispute. We then turn to examine the methods of intervention into disputes, first describing a pattern of what we refer to as, entry by “doing being neutralistic”, and second, a pattern of entry demonstrating how members coordinate their turns through what we call “coordination by commentary”.

4.1. The moral tightrope of ‘An Intervention’

Our first collection features cases where disputants sanction interveners for interfering in their dispute. In so doing, they orient to their position in the dispute as morally compromised, as well as the potential of such sanctions to “flip the script”, so to say. Thus, these first cases highlight what is at stake for intervening parties, and thereby emphasise what the ensuing practices work to avoid. Here we explore a possible consequence or, framed differently, a disputant's practice: sanctioning the intervener.

To begin, Extract 1 was recorded in a car park in the United States, Amy has been questioning Matteo (the person filming) about whether they are in the United States legally and has begun to call the police to report Matteo. Prior to Line 1 (L01), Jon, sitting in a nearby car, has offered a possible solution to Amy's publicly available search for a location name during her emergency service call, and then subsequently opposes Amy's stance. As we will see in this extract, Amy sanctions Jon for his intervention (see Fig. 1).

Extract 1 TPMM04 [02:41–03:12]

01 Jon: [it's at the corner of] auto center and
 02 (lo[ma palona)
 03 Amy: [I'm gonna <block the fucker's truck>. I'M GONNA
 04 BLOCK THIS FUCKER'S TRUCK THAT DOESN'T BELONG IN
 05 GLENDORA.=WHO ARE YOU. (0.7) who's this motherFucker
 06 (.) that doesn't belong=do you have a green card?
 07 Jon: he- he- he works with those guys over there=
 08 Amy: =no no no no no. I don't know who this guy is
 09 Jon: <HE WORKS [WITH THOSE guys>] over there.
 10 Amy: [how do you know.]
 11 You know who he is?
 12 Jon: he works with those guys over there
 13 Amy: he came out of the bushes
 14 Jon: he works with those guys [on the (border/corner)]
 15 Amy: [who's those]
 16 guys? is it the railroad company?
 17 Jon: eye ell bee, international line buil[ders]
 18 Amy: [okay] cause I
 19 don't know this guy, he's videotaping me, and he
 20 looks creepy from mexico. he's speaking (.) broken
 21 english (.) la migra
 22 Jon: okay that's (.) super racist
 23 Amy: it's not racist
 24 Jon: it is racist=
 25 Amy: =no it's not
 26 Jon: yes it is
 27 Amy: I have a [friend
 28 Mat: [wo:w]
 29 Amy: down the [stree:t]

30 Jon: [you have] repeated[ly said]
 31 Amy: [no it's not]
 32 Jon: he belo:[ngs in mexico. that is]
 33 Amy: [no (.) I seen a guy beat up]
 34 Jon: ra: cism=
 35 Amy: =no it's not racist=
 36 Jon: =yes [it is:]
 37 Amy: [my da:]d is black.
 38 Jon: all he has [to do is have (a piece)]
 39 Amy: [my da::d is black.]
 40 Jon: required [to speak english]
 41 Amy: [I'm not racist.] this guy is from mexico:,
 42 they punk people, and they fucking don't know
 43 everybody's goddamn illegal shit. (.) you understand?
 44 Jon: yeah. [(I do understand)]
 45 Amy: [and- my dad's] black, don't call me a
 46 racist asshole.
 47 Jon: my family works in law en[forcement]
 ((14 lines omitted))
 61 Amy: [it's not racist stupid. don't tell me I]'m racist
 62 Jon: [you could be any color and be racist] ^Fig. 1
 63 Amy: because he's mexican my little nephew's (.) italian,
 64 (.) [mexican, and aloha. (.) stupid fuck. don't tell me
 65 i'm racist.]
 66 Jon: [i'm not saying you're racist because he's mexican,
 67 i'm saying you're racist for saying he belongs in
 68 mexico]
 69 Amy: this ↑fu(.)↓cker is coming]
 70 out of the bushes:, telling me to move my car,
 71 because he can't park straight fucker. (.) stupid ass.
 72 I wanna know who this (.) piece uh shit is.
 73 (0.8)
 74 Amy: ya understand? (1.0) who the ↑fuck are you.
 75 do ya have a green card? are ya legit. that's all
 76 I'm asking. (0.5) I don't (wanna feed)
 77 [your fucking up] American lives.
 78 Mat: [wo::w some people]
 79 (1.6)
 80 Amy: racist.
 81 (0.8)
 82 Amy: what are you doin sitting in your fucking car.
 83 get a job stupid fuck. get his job. (1.0)
 84 he can sit in his fucking [car
 85 Mat: [some people

Jeffersonian transcript for Extract 1.

The initial dispute is between Amy and Mateo, evidenced by the emergency services call that Amy is placing at the beginning of the excerpted segment. Jon's entrance is not into what might be understandable to analysts as their 'participation framework' per se, but rather is offering a possible solution to a publicly available search for information. He first provides a location for where they are ("corner of auto center and loma paloma", L01-2) and subsequently (re)produces an account for Mateo's presence ("he works with those guys over there", L07, 09, 12, 14), which Amy has given as the account for the 911 call. Although Jon has offered an account in support of a disputant, Jon has not yet taken a stance explicitly *contra* Amy's position in this dispute. However, Amy's consistent rejection of Jon's account that Mateo "works with those guys over there", which gets further specified to "eye ell bee international line builders" (L17), is also further supplemented with a category account (Raymond, 2019) for his non-belonging on the basis of his racial/national origin ("creepy from Mexico",



Fig. 1. Amy on the phone to the emergency services.

“speaking broken English”, “la migra”, L20-1). Subsequently, Jon’s intervention shifts from one completing Amy’s search and offering an account for Mateo’s legitimate presence in the area to an accusation of racism (L22).

Amy repeatedly works to resist the assessment that her talk, and subsequently that she (displaying an orientation to the idea that racist talk is category-bound to racists) is racist by providing accounts designed to present her concern as legitimate and to inoculate herself against further accusations of racism (L61, 63–5, 69–74). Following a series of pauses marking possible completion points (L73, 79, 81) where Jon might be a relevant next speaker but does not select to take the turn space, Amy marks Jon’s presence and entry into the dispute as complainable. However, this comes well after Jon’s initial intervention and subsequent accusations of racism. Indeed, Jon has already affiliated with Mateo in the dispute and overtly taken a side, so much so that his intervention has been targeted for response. Amy’s question at L82 (“what are you doin sitting in your fucking car”) treats as problematic his participation in the dispute *qua* his presence in the area altogether. The subsequent related sanctions that he “get a job” and is a “stupid fuck” (L83) further downgrade the moral stance that Jon has taken relative to Amy. In shifting the focus from whether her side in the dispute is racist to the moral status of Jon’s presence (i.e., orienting to his *being there* as somehow morally deficient), Amy displays an orientation to her own position in the ongoing dispute as morally compromised and otherwise indefensible insofar as the blameworthiness, and obligation to account for one’s status is placed on Jon. While Jon could be thought of as both ‘ratified’ and ‘unratified’ throughout the encounter, inspecting Amy, Matteo and Jon’s turns as they unfold offers a clearer view as to how exactly Jon treads the intervention tightrope which is not accounted for in inflexible ‘participation frameworks’. This potential for members endogenous to an ongoing dispute to sanction members who intervene in a dispute is seen in Extract 2, which comes from a dispute on public transport in the United States. The recording begins after the initial dispute, which seemingly involved Ana and Avi/Max (who are behind the camera). Apparently, the initial dispute centred on Ana’s demand that Avi speak English, where he was previously speaking another language with a third member (possibly Max). Gus, a bystander, then intervenes contra Ana, which is made apparent in the extract below. As in Extract 1, the locus of the dispute seemingly shifts thereafter, with Gus and Ana as the primary disputants, rather than Ana and Avi, with whom it began (see Fig. 2).

Extract 2 TPMM05 [00:14–00:38]

01 Gus: the united states doesn't have an official
 02 ↑lan↓guage jackass ^Fig. 2
 03 Avi: [thank you::::]
 04 Max: [ye::(h)a(h)ah::]
 05 Ana: uhm. I never [said it did]
 06 Max: [↑woo:::::]
 07 Gus: ↑↑OH:↓: ↑WELL then they don't have to speak
 08 it for you. ↓because they're NOT talking to you
 09 Ana: I'm so: gla[d you got involved in this conversation]
 10 Max: [e:xa::ctly::]
 11 Gus: YEAH [me too because otherwise no]body
 12 would be
 13 Max: [you shoulda just mind your OWN business]
 14 Gus: standing up to your racist ass
 15 Ana: really
 16 Gus: ↑↑yeah
 17 Ana: that's con[sidered ra]cism?
 18 Gus: [REALLY] yes. [it is.]
 19 Ana: [I got ()-]
 20 okay
 21 Gus: and you should learn the defi[nition] of it
 22 Ana: [right]
 23 Gus: and not just show your ass in public again

Jeffersonian transcript for Extract 2.



Fig. 2. Ana facing the other passengers.

Extract 2 begins with Gus rejecting a demand from Ana that Avi and Max speak English on the bus, giving the account that there is no official mandate requiring they do so. Avi and Max's subsequent appreciations of Gus' turn, similarly produced at L06 ("↑woo:::") and L10 ("e:xa::ctly::"), are produced as response cries that affiliate with Gus without stopping the progressivity of the ongoing dispute. These act as a judgement against Ana while being produced as responsive to Gus, which, combined with the way they do not inhibit progressivity, makes them less able to be responded to, and thus more in line with the coordinated turn practices discussed below in 4.3. Thus, we see how the locus of dispute can shift, and that this shift can be ratified by so-called "original" disputants.

However, as demonstrated in Extract 1, when someone intervenes in a dispute in a way that takes up the turn space, disrupts progressivity between initial disputants, and overtly takes a side, it tips the scales of the dispute. Here we see Ana sanction Gus for his intervention as a last-ditch effort, working to undermine his moral stance by implicating his "get[ting] involved" (L09) as inappropriate. The sequential positioning of Ana's turn—after Gus's sanctioning Ana for what he frames as an inappropriate intervention (L07–08)—along with prosodic features of the elongated "so:" sarcastically appreciates Gus and thus sanctions his involvement. Although Ana's sanction holds Gus accountable for his intervention, Gus uses the format of Ana's turn to produce an agreement plus account, which characterises Ana and her conduct as racist. Gus's account here is consistent with the discussion above: members orient to assessments of turns-at-talk or individuals as racist as providing a possible account for the intervention (as in Extract 1). Gus's entry into the dispute not only in affiliation with Max and Avi, but explicitly on their side of the dispute and *against* Ana, introduces an explicit moral sanctioning that could bring the dispute to a close with Ana as the morally compromised party. Sanctioning him for his intervention orients to this status as morally compromised, and her retreat to questioning if what she has done even constitutes racism at all (L17), indicates her side of the dispute is all but lost.

Thus, we can see that interveners are faced with a problem of accountability: any intervention will effectively sanction one side for something they have done. Any such side-taking can be called-to-account or treated itself as a normative breach (as in Extract 2) typically by the disputants whose position is sanctioned by an intervention. Notably, this counter-sanctioning demonstrates the disputant's orientation to the precarity of their moral position. However, what is significant is what this practice highlights in terms of the stakes for those who might intervene into ongoing disputes. Despite any normative pressures or impulses that might incentivise intervention, including the possible severity of the normative breach at the heart of the dispute, potential interveners are also faced with the disincentives of moral sanctions for intervention. We now move to examine two practices through which members can intervene into public disputes while mitigating the possibility of such sanctions.

4.2. Neutralistic stance-taking as a form of "Non-Accountable" entry

One method of entry into an ongoing dispute available to members is to produce a neutralistic stance. The "neutralistic stance" was coined by Heritage and Greatbatch (1991) in their analysis of news interviews. They explain that interviewer turns, for example, are structured such that they preserve the "neutrality" of the interviewer despite any embedded "hostility" in that turn. Similarly, Clayman (2002) has examined the problems of maintaining neutralism in the context of a panel interview, wherein differential treatment of interviewees, including via implicit affiliation in questioning, can solicit third-party interventions and sanctions. Across the cases explored below, we see members working to maintain a position somewhat exogenous to the ongoing dispute while nonetheless orienting to the fact that entering the ongoing dispute—and entering in the way they do—inherently affiliates them with one side.

The following is taken from a dispute on public transport. Before Line 1, the recording has captured both Ann and Sue characterising what has caused the argument (see Fig. 3a). Ostensibly that is Sue has been playing music loudly through her headphones and Ann has rudely asked her to turn the volume down. It is at this point where Joe, a fellow traveller, enters and treats this entry into the ongoing dispute as disruptive as we demonstrate below (see Fig. 3b).

Extract 3 TPMM02 [01:02–01:42]

01 Ann: I dare you go on
 02 Sue: you d-
 03 (0.5)
 04 Sue: you d- (hang/hold) on who the FUCK- who are you
 05 Ann: >I've just said< ^Fig. 3a
 06 Sue: you dare me.
 07 Ann: yes?
 08 Sue: you dare me to do what=
 09 Ann: =play your musi[c loud]
 10 Joe: [sorry] no offence but
 11 she's got a point ^Fig. 3b
 12 (.)
 13 Sue: oh she's got a point about what
 14 Joe: you're playing music loud [she asked ()]
 15 Sue: [MATE I've got]

16 my headphones in >if she don't like it she can
 17 move elsewhere then she's telling me to move
 18 she's tapping me op-<
 19 (0.5)
 20 **Ann:** I was not touching you
 21 **Sue:** who- (oh lord)
 22 **Ann:** I re- I requested you to turn it down politely
 23 >and I've got nothing but verbal abuse from you<=
 24 **Sue:** =<woman> yo[u came] in my face
 25 **Ann:** [(good)]
 26 **Sue:** I talked to you politely
 27 **Ann:** you jus- and you would not
 28 **Sue:** I put my headphones in and you came in my face
 29 **Ann:** [I a:sked you]
 30 **Sue:** [you came in my face] <more than once> don't start
 31 with me you know [don-]
 32 **Ann:** [I AM]
 33 NOT SCARED of you:: young lady.=
 34 **Sue:** >you shouldn't ↑be you shouldn't be.< why- why should
 35 you >be scared because I'm black<=
 36 **Ann:** because you're just abu:sive.

Jeffersonian transcript for Extract 3.



Fig. 3. a. Ann and Sue sat beside one another. b. Joe standing with his phone in his hand.

Prior to L01, Sue has told Ann that she will continue playing her music loudly despite Ann's objections. In L01, Ann dares Sue to play her music thus implicitly threatening her that there will be consequences if she does. Sue directly questions Ann's rights to make such a threat in L04 "who the FUCK- who are you". There is some back and forth between Ann and Sue questioning the legitimacy of the "dare" before Joe, the intervener, enters their dispute. In L10, Joe claims a turn at talk; he does this whilst ostensibly on the phone and preparing to leave at the approaching station, possibly to limit the extent that he might be held accountable for intervening. His intervention: "sorry no offence but she's got a point" (L10-11) is produced as a delicate, potentially sanctionable, action as he enters without invitation. Indeed, he targets the talk "she's got a point" (L11) rather than the actual offence—that Ann is making a reasonable argument. Though his turn affiliates with Ann by treating

himself as disrupting their dispute it does not directly state his stance toward the transgression thus he operates on the meta-level of being exogenous to their dispute. Sue ratifies his participation in the dispute in L13 by asking Joe what the “point” is “oh she’s got a point about what”, compelling Joe to go on-the-record with his support of, and affiliation with, Ann. Joe answers by reporting “you’re playing music loud” (L14); and although this assesses the volume, it does not directly take a stance toward whether volume is a problem. Sue in overlap attends to his object-side assessment (that the music is loud) in L15–18: “MATE I’ve got my headphones in”, her turn tacitly accepts the assessment that the music is loud but formulates the previous activity for Joe (see [Pillet-Shore, 2010](#)) to resist the implication that she has been disruptive because she was using headphones. Joe then moves to leave the train and thus the dispute—though the dispute continues with Sue attending to the racist nature of Ann’s assertions (of not being scared) “why should you >be scared because I’m black<” (L35).

In sum, Joe intervenes by self-selecting and treating his action as possibly disruptive to the activity, this works to produce himself as ‘outside of’ the activity; moreover, these turns are formulated as observations about the conduct (see [Edwards and Potter, 2017](#) on object-side assessments) rather than stance-taking assessments. The rigidity of ‘participation frameworks’ is evident here as it does not quite capture, at the same level of detail as a focus on categorisation, how Joe is conceivably a part of their local framework (and ‘ratified’ as such) but his talk is designedly exogenous to it. We now turn to a discussion of how such interventions constitute what and who is the ‘problem’ in an ongoing dispute.

Extract 4 is from public transport and features a dispute between four people. In this excerpt Gia is accusing Joy of having an attitude and being racist because Joy called her a “white slag”. Seated beside Joy is Ali who is not ostensibly involved in the dispute ([Fig. 4](#)) but attempts to mediate. Here we see Ali treat his turns as intervening and himself as a third-party, yet his attempts at intervention are blocked by Gia who treats him as being related to Joy. This excerpt is complicated so before beginning analysis let us track the events that lead to the intervention. The recording begins as race becomes topicalised by Joy (one of the standing women) seemingly providing an account on Zoe and/or Flo’s (the two seated women) behalf for something not captured in the recording. The dispute regards something that might have been said until L10 where Joy accuses Zoe or Flo (it is unclear) of calling Gia (the other standing woman) a “white slag”. The recording has not captured Zoe or Flo calling Gia a “white slag”, so this has either happened before the recording or is a mishearing.

Extract 4 TPMM03 [00:10–00:24]

01 Joy: Cause [you’re muslim.]
 02 Zoe: [you don’t know her] [you don’t know he:r.]
 03 Gia: [() never said anything-]
 04 never said [anything about that]
 05 Gia: [DON’T ()]
 06 Zoe: [LISTe:n. so what she trying to say what she say]
 07 Flo: [°whatever whatever whatever whatever°]
 08 Gia: [like i’m some dickhead]
 09 i’m not [a fool]]
 10 Joy: [she]↑just called her a white slag?
 11 Gia: call me a white slag
 12 Flo: WOah [what she mean]
 13 Zoe: [what she mean]
 14 Flo: what she trying to say
 15 Joy: with your attitude the way you’re
 16 *CARR[Ying on.]=
 17 Gia: [(RIGHT) e]
 18 Zoe: =*so why she say that *
 18a ali: *...raises arm--, ^**Fig. 4** *
 19 Ali: can you [just () p]lease.
 20 Gia: [hello:]
 21 I don’t care if that’s your family or not or one of
 22 yours yeah? I don’t give a shit
 23 Ali: [finish it]
 24 Gia: [she’s sitt]i[ng there with a headscarf on like]
 25 Joy: [calling her a white slag]
 26 Gia: I’m gonna be threatened
 27 Ali: I understand but-
 28 Gia: calling me a white slag that’s racist
 29 don’t [fucking be racist]

Jeffersonian transcript for Extract 4.



Fig. 4. Configuration of participants as Ali raises his arm.

Flo and Zoe between L12–14 seek clarification about what Joy is doing with her “white slag” accusation: “what she mean”, “what she trying to say”. It is unclear what Joy responds to in L15 but it sequentially deletes the seeking clarification and returns to unpack her turn on L01. L15 is implicitly racist and we can see it this way as it accounts for Zoe and Flo’s actions (whatever they were) as not just because of who they are in the here-and-now, but because they are Muslim—and thus attitudes that Muslim’s hold account for their current actions. It is at this point that the third-party intervenes.

The physical configuration of members sets up that the third party is on the side of Zoe and Flo as he is seated beside them; however, Ali’s intervention (L19 & 23) is an effort to mediate the dispute—and to that extent, he is treated as extraneous to the dispute despite being seated beside Zoe and Flo. Ali’s intervention does not take a stance against any interlocutor, but instead treats the activity of disputing as the problem. As in Extract 3, Ali claims a turn by raising his hand to physically take the turn space (see Fig. 4), he accompanies this movement with a plea “can you just () please” (L19)—later directly calling for an end to the dispute: “finish it” (L23). The full turn is inaudible but the action is hearably a plea for cessation of the dispute. He punctuates his intervention with sincerity: the minimising “just” (Holmes et al., 2017), the juxtaposed politeness with “please”, and the embodied conduct. In doing so, it renders the intervention as impartial, not disputative, and thus potentially not accountable.

The intervention is responded to in two parts: first, it is acknowledged by Gia who greets Ali with “hello” (L20) following his arm raise and turn at talk. The greeting is oddly placed but responds to the self-selected nature of Ali’s turn by treating him as entering the dispute. The second part of the response is in L21–22: here, Gia neglects to see him as a third party “I don’t care if that’s your family”. The swift dismissal manages his participation—thus rejecting the possibility that Ali could take a ‘neutral’ position like Joe took in Extract 3. She builds onto this turn a racist sentiment: “or one of yours yeah?” (L21–23). We can take this as racist because it attends to shared membership, not on the basis that they are family (which is provided for earlier in the turn), but because he is not white and thus it diminishes his participation on those grounds. His participation provides for Gia to go ‘outside of’ the dispute to address Ali (though the talk is designed to be heard by all interlocutors (Craig, 1999)) in L24 “she’s sitting there with a headscarf on”. The intervention enables Gia to comment on the ongoing activity, we see this in Extract 3 (and next in Extract 5) where there are appeals to a third party that take a moral position against the activity of disputing to effectively blame their co-disputants (see, Atkinson and Drew, 1979). Further attempts by Ali to intervene and mediate in L23 and 27 are unsuccessful as he is ignored by disputants as Gia and Zoe launch a diatribe against Joy and Flo.

4.3. Coordinated turns as a form of participation

In contrast to the cases discussed above, wherein members act in a neutralistic manner to enter a dispute without ostensibly taking a side *within* the dispute, the practice explored in this section is one whereby members comment on the ongoing dispute. These comments evaluate some problematic conduct and can be heard collectively therefore are difficult for disputants to single out. This practice which we are describing as coordination by commentary, might colloquially be called piling on or heckling. The coordination of turns as almost chorally produced targets an individual for a transgression, in our cases, racism, for which the sanctioning is amplified by the sheer number demonstrating opposition to an individual. This phenomenon is partly described by [Kerrison \(2018, chapter 4\)](#) as “batch participation”, and is what [Lerner \(2002\)](#) calls “choral co-production”, as it is designed as a collaborative response targeting the co-production of a single unit of talk. It also shares features with [Clayman's \(1993\)](#) description of “heckling”, as these turns are individually produced and thus “intrinsically solitary actions” (p. 119). However, they retain a key feature of the former: individual turns are difficult to target due to the collaborative nature of the action, thus somewhat insulating participants from the accountability of their intervention.

We can see this in extract 5, where Jen (pictured in [Fig. 5](#)) is arguing with Reg, who is not visible in the video, on public transport in the United States. While the initial conflict is between Jen and Reg, bystanders Ava, Bob, Lea, and Gar intervene following Jen's use of a severe racial slur at L01 and 03, as well as her raised voice in L03-04. Lea's turn, which begins inaudibly as it overlaps with Jen, is not ostensibly directed at Jen, evidenced by the use of third-person pronouns and the assessment of Jen as “crazy.” Moreover, the sex-based account (her period, L06) for Jen's behaviour alongside the assessment thereof suggests the turn is designed for Reg or other bystanders as a display of disaffiliation with Jen⁴.

Extract 5 TPM06 [00:00–00:30]

01 **Jen:** N*GG*R³
 02 **Reg:** you (recharged) to him
 03 **Jen:** fuck you n*gg*r. I NEVER LIKED YOU I NEVER
 04 [WILL LIKE YOU N*GG*R]
 05 **Lea:** [()] you
 06 know she's crazy: but she's on her period.
 07 **Reg:** she gettin the next stop right busdriver:?
 08 **Bus:** ah: yeah
 09 **Ava:** [yeah:: next stop. (.) outta here]
 10 **Reg:** [in jesus' name (.) she (can fu)ck) this stop
 11 **Jen:** in jesus' name? you [don't believe in g- er-
 12 **Reg:** [in JE:sus'-
 13 **Ava:** in [je:sus] na::me
 14 **Jen:** [SHUT_UP] ^**Fig. 5**
 15 **Reg:** in JEsus
 16 **Jen:** () fucking [kill you]
 17 **Reg:** [JEsus]
 18 **Jen:** fuck you n*gg*r=
 19 **Reg:** =JEsus
 20 **Jen:** n*gg*r. put your [head down]
 21 **Bob:** [your momma said] [it was a]
 22 **Reg:** [JEsus]
 23 **Bob:** (n*gg*/*[r)'s dick she was suckin (all day))]
 24 **Jen:** [PUT your head down ()]
 25 **Reg:** JE:sus
 26 **Jen:** N*GG*R: PUT YOUR HEAD DOWN N*GG*R
 27 **Reg:** JEsus
 28 **Jen:** [N*GG*R you got murder] in your [e:yes] n*gg*r
 29 **Ava:** [what the fu::ck]
 30 **Gar:** [jesus]

Jeffersonian transcript for Extract 5.

⁴ While we endeavour to provide a faithful representation of the recording free from analysts' judgement of what we might consider 'offensive', we are equally conscious that legitimate harm could come from the word's inclusion. We decided on partial censorship so the meaning is retained but is sensitive to the hurt that it may cause.



Fig. 5. Jen standing on the bus.

Other bystanders coordinate their turns by producing similar displays of (dis)affiliation through reproducing Reg's turn at L10 ("in Jesus' name"). Prior to this, Reg has solicited the driver to provide an "institutional warrant" to force Jen off the bus at the next stop (cf. Whitehead et al., 2018:333). In soliciting participation from the bus driver, Reg signals a move towards disengaging from the confrontation with Jen: "getting the next stop right busdriver:?" (L07); however, his following turn is designed for overhearers and escalates by commenting on Jen (L10). The driver confirms Reg's question and another overhearer responds with appreciation that comments on the conflict. Subsequently, Reg ratifies and upgrades Ava's appreciation by adding the intensifier "in Jesus' name" (L10) that marks appreciation and upgrades Ava's turn at L09. Although Reg's turn is not designed for Jen as recipient as it refers to her in the third-person, Jen responds and undermines the legitimacy of Reg's appreciative turn in L10 by providing an account based in Reg's (dis)belief.

Reg and various overhearers react to Jen's turn by coordinating their commentary in recycling the components of Reg's turn (from L10), which Jen had rejected. Reg's multiple recyclings of this turn component and subsequent recycling by Ava (L13) are oriented to by Jen as an escalation, which she displays at L14 with increased volume and an apparent initiation of physical violence. The continued recycling of "in Jesus' name" is chorally co-produced (Lerner, 2002) and so is designedly 'done together' rather than individually, although the turns are taken individually rather than formally co-produced. Doing this takes the moral high ground by indexing the insulting nature of Jen's utterances without constituting a reciprocal insult. Moreover, Reg's recycling of this turn component orients to closing the topic and disengaging the conflict (much like Stivers' (2004) multiple sayings as a form of topic closing). Seeing how interlocutors attend to one another—as individuals and as a collective—highlights the intricate category work that people engage with on a moment-by-moment basis, an intricacy collapsed by the typological rigidity of participation frameworks. Ultimately, while there are instances of overhearers encouraging the continuation of the conflict, what we see here is predominantly the participation of third-party members to topic close.

We move to another dispute on public transport. The dispute has stemmed from a request made by Mia that Eli move away from her. Prior to the extract Eli has characterised this request as being based on his race, which Mia has rejected and has instead asserted that it was due to Eli bumping into her. The extract begins with Eli and Mia in overlap before Mia exclaims that Eli's problem is grounded in the history of slavery (L10), which solicits entrance from Ali, Liv, and Jay from "outside" of the dispute. These interveners build their turns as non-sanctionable in part by constituting Mia's turn(s) as normatively

unsalvageable (i.e., deplorable) and in part through their coordination, which makes their own turns more difficult to singularly target for uptake (see Fig. 6).

Extract 6 TPMM01 [01:03–01:56]

01 **Eli:** [mind your business don't talk alright then
 02 keep talking]
 03 **Mia:** [you can be here as long as you behave like a human
 04 being]
 05 [I have no problem with that] yeah?
 06 **Eli:** [you don't behave like a human being]
 07 **Pet:** ((inaudible))
 09 **Mia:** you have a problem because you guys used to be
 10 a slaves: yeah?
 11 **Liv:** shu:t [up]
 12 **Eli:** [whA:t you saying]
 13 **Liv:** WHA↑t the f::
 14 **Eli:** >>you are [you are you go- you] go- you see <<
 15 **Mia:** [no no no you were-]
 16 **Liv:** [no no no< shut up shut up don't- ((inaudible))]
 17 **Eli:** [you see you just telling you're just i- you're j]ust
 18 playing out to- your just playing out your anger now
 19 you're playing out your whatevers in your mi:nd.=
 20 **Mia:** =they told me you are not (killed)
 22 **Liv:** [d-d-d-don't care don't care don't say that don't say
 23 that you don't know shit shut up don't say that don't
 24 say that]
 25 **Mia:** [I know I know]
 26 **Eli:** [you see what she's saying you see what you're saying
 27 you yeah you see what you just said yeah
 28 **Mia:** he told me to fuck off to my country ((inaudible))
 29 **Eli:** I will spit on <your- Ugly face Ugly face>
 30 **Liv:** fuck off then [don't say that]
 31 **Jay:** [WELL FUCK OFF THEN] ((inaudible))=
 32 **Eli:** =I will spit on your ugly face [for called me that]
 33 **Sam:** [you can't say that]
 34 this is England ^Fig. 6
 35 **Liv:** [dickhead (.) dickhead]
 36 **Eli:** you called me a slav+e did you just call me a sla+ve
 37 [did you just call me a sla+ve]
 38 **Mia:** [you are (vicious/ridiculous)]
 39 =no that is [history do you know anything
 40 about history?]

Jeffersonian transcript for Extract 6.

The first instance of an intervention is by Liv in L11. Her intervention responds to the apparent egregiousness of what Mia has said—"you guys used to be slaves" (L09–10)—by instructing Mia to "shut up" (L11). Unlike in Extracts 3 and 4, there is no work to display a neutralistic stance—rather, her turn plainly and exclusively objects to the action in the prior turn. The direct sanctioning renders Mia as acting outside of the ordinary, unlike a mediated intervention such as in Extract 3, which does not speak to the same level of apparent egregiousness as an instant rebuttal does. Indeed, her intervention serves as a commentary on what has been said: "WHA↑t the f::" (L13). Subsequently, Mia's third position repair in L15, initiated by the repeated "no"s, treats Liv and Eli's outraged responses (second position, L11–14) as misunderstandings of her "slaves" utterance (first position, L09) but before she can complete the repair, she drops out of competition for the turn space. Instead, Liv and Eli sanction her further (L16–19), orienting to her initiated repair as immaterial.

Mia, having been positioned as an egregious racist via the intervention, now claims to be the victim of a xenophobic action by the other party at L28 ("told me to fuck off to my country"), appealing to the interveners to reconsider having affiliated with Eli. In response Liv and Jay endorse the reported directive to "fuck off" (L30–31) and thus co-implicate themselves in the xenophobia of which Mia has accused Eli. Sam, another intervener, interjects with an account for why Mia's initial turn (L12) is so problematic and for the response it has received: such racist vitriol is an action category-tied to membership in the category English (L33–34). Following this, Mia makes an appeal to historicity ("that is history", L39) that orients to the possible moral neutrality of her account based on its factuality (cf. Whitehead (2018) on moral accountability and stereotype 'accuracy', also Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990) on authentic categories). Ultimately, the dispute peters out with further turns treating *talking at all* as objectionable.

Much as in Extract 5 where the "in Jesus' name" operates to stop turns in progress and sanction Jen for talking, the interveners here also restrict the turn space and explicitly oppose Mia, the person spouting racist turns. Across cases we see that



Fig. 6. Liv and Jay accuse Mia of being racist toward Eli while Sam pleads for calm.

when multiple individuals coordinate their turns, whether it be as a commentary on the matters, as a direct insult/threat or both, it definitively condemns the target behaviour and silences the perpetrator so that they cannot be heard amongst the ruckus. Moreover, the practice serves to insulate each individual intervener from sanction due to the difficulty of targeting any single intervention for uptake, which further enables and bolsters the possibility of direct and sanctioning intervention.

5. Discussion

This paper has scrutinised the interactional methods and practices which are used when a third party intervenes into a dispute, thus providing empirical insight into what constitutes an intervention, and how interlocutors treat interventions. We found that interventions occur at specific sequential positions and are occasioned by some escalation in the dispute to warrant their involvement. We tracked that interveners make attempts to maintain the appearance of ‘neutrality’ to mediate an argument or sanction a party in the dispute outrightly while deploying practices that mitigate their own moral precarity.

We first illustrated the ‘stakes’ of intervening and precisely how interveners are held accountable for interfering in an ongoing dispute before describing two ways that overhearers do indeed intervene. In our second collection of cases, we considered how interveners produce a neutralistic stance via politeness markers, object-side assessments, and orientations to being outside of the dispute. These interventions are characterised by efforts to diminish the appearance of affiliating with one side in the dispute despite the inherent non-neutrality of doing an intervention. Compare this to our third collection, coordinated commentary: these interventions are distinguished by the repeated production of turns that comment on some prior action oriented to as egregiously racist in the dispute. In doing this, individuals make themselves more difficult to target for response as their turns can be heard collectively. Across our data we observe that the apparent moral reprehensibility of racist behaviour warrants intervention, and that interveners employ a variety of interactional strategies to restrict a disputant’s ability to target them for their intervention.

Finally, our analysis shows that ‘participation frameworks’ are not adequate for accurately understanding how people configure themselves and track their local environment: interveners need not be ratified nor do their intentions matter. For ethnomethodological approaches, glossing participation as ‘overhearers’, ‘bystanders’ and even ‘interveners’, while useful as lay descriptors, does not accurately represent how people are configured and assumes an equality of access to an interaction. We therefore argue that how an interlocutor’s action engages them in an (ongoing) interaction vis-à-vis a ‘trajectory of

engagement' is both fundamental for categorisation (cf. Schegloff, 2001), and for analytically revealing how hurdles are navigated to enter the so-called 'protected circle' of conversation (Goffman, 1971), which might prevent a newcomer from entering an ongoing encounter. In this regard 'participation frameworks', which treat speaker intention as a central concern and rigidly gloss participation, are not as equipped as CA is to reveal the moment-by-moment reasoning and categorisation practices of interlocutors. Paying very close attention to sequential and categorisation practices shows that 'participation frameworks' are ill-suited in scrutinising complex 'trajectories of engagement' throughout an encounter and reveals how people handle the dilemma of managing the moral injunctive to intervene with the difficulty of barging into someone else's conversation. The rigidity of participation frameworks does not sufficiently (for our purposes) capture what interlocutors are doing in and through their engagement in ongoing disputes.

To conclude, our analysis has shown interlocutors attending to racist talk by spontaneously intervening to challenge that racism. Interlocutors have a repertoire of practices to design their interventions which in turn, index the particular environment within which their intervention occurs. Intervening is treated as interactionally dangerous as the intervener might become the target of those in the encounter and this can, of course, have ramifications beyond the encounter. That notwithstanding, we believe that the danger of intervening does not outweigh the danger of not calling out racism particularly if one is supported or privileged to do so. We hope that by closely mapping the routine methods and practices of interventions that we can not only shine a light on matters of participation, but also add to a body of evidence for how bigotry can be called out.

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Data availability

Data is available in the corresponding author's institutional repository.

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