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Race and the Management of Talk in an Online  
Discussion List

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## Race and the Management of Talk in an Online Discussion List

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## **Abstract**

Since its inception the internet has grown to have an all pervasive impact on social life, affecting the private, socio-cultural, economic and political aspects of human existence. An e-mail discussion list hosted on the internet by a South African Tertiary Education institution provides an opportunity for researchers to study how members of the list manage textual talk amongst themselves. Given the context of the study, race is the “elephant” in the room, or in this case the online space, which may be pointed out at any given moment in conversation on the discussion list. The analysis of the data in this study indicate that participants in an asynchronous discourse environment make extensive use of techniques such as addressivity, linking or quoting to maintain the relevancy of their contribution to the conversation. As well as these techniques, there is evidence that echoing is a crucial conversational process through which inter-subjective understanding is created amongst members of the discussion list. Furthermore, the analysis displayed that race talk in this context is occasioned to perform specific social activity, for example, drawing in the audience to inferred systems of meaning by gesturing towards a racial membership category which then forces listeners to apply their common sense knowledge in an effort to hear race as relevant for understanding the conversation. The study concludes by arguing that the discursive techniques presented in the data are relevant to the further study of discourse, and especially discourse where race may be occasioned at any given time, in post-apartheid South Africa.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	7
1.1. The Transformation of Higher Education in South Africa .....	7
1.2. Situating the Research .....	8
1.3. The Research Question .....	9
2. Literature Review .....	11
2.1. The Internet as a Location of Discursive Phenomena.....	11
2.2. Discursive Social Psychology and the Study of Talk.....	15
2.3. Shared Knowledge in Discourse .....	17
2.3. Race Talk as Discursive Social Activity .....	21
2.4. Discourse and Repression .....	23
2.6. Conclusion .....	26
3. Methodology.....	28
3.1. Theoretical Perspective.....	28
3.2. Sampling.....	29
3.3. Data Collection .....	31
3.4. Validity, Reliability and Generalizability.....	32
3.5. Data analysis.....	34
3.6. Codes.....	36
3.7. Ethical Issues .....	39
4. Analysis & Discussion.....	41
4.1. The Management of Discourse as a Collaborative Effort Online.....	41
4.2. Discursive Management of Problematic Race Talk.....	57
4.3. Issues for further analysis .....	71
5. Conclusion.....	72
6. References .....	74

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. The Transformation of Higher Education in South Africa

The abolishment of apartheid has led to the implementation of desegregation and transformation policies in South Africa with the objective of redressing previous social inequalities at both the individual and institutional level (Johnson, 1995). The Department of Education in 1997 released White Paper 3, which detailed the transformation process. The policy stated that “all existing practices, institutions and values are viewed anew and rethought in terms of their fitness for the new era” and went on to call for a single, nationally co-ordinated, higher education system which is “democratic, non-racial and non-sexist” (Department of Education, 1997, n.p). Of especial relevance to this study are the structural changes which occurred at many tertiary institutions post-apartheid, as institutions which had hitherto operated independently from one another under the apartheid regime were merged by order of the Department of Education with the predominant goal of removing inequalities of the past (Department of Education, 2002). As an example, universities which were defined as historically disadvantaged such as the University of Durban-Westville were to be merged with historically ‘white’ institutions such as the University of Natal (Johnson, 1995, Department of Education, 2002). Thus, the merger of the University of Natal with the University of Durban-Westville led to the creation of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in the year 2004 in accordance with the transformative processes implemented by the Department of Education. However, this was not an easy process to implement and institutional transformation in the new South Africa is typically characterised as a highly racialised and politically charged process (Fourie, 1999, Franchi, 2003). In fact, an assessment conducted in 2008 on the state of the reforms reported above returned the conclusion that “discrimination, in particular with regard to racism and sexism, is pervasive in our institutions” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 13). The environment created by the structural changes to UKZN provides the researcher with a microcosm of South African society within which to study transformation and race talk in interaction, but first the context of UKZN from which the research question emerged must be established.

## 1.2. Situating the Research

As a result of the transformation process, the University of KwaZulu-Natal has experienced a number of controversies since its inception in 2004, and it is important that this context which plays an integral part in the current study be outlined beforehand. Professor Malegapuru Makgoba was appointed to oversee the transformation process as the vice-chancellor of UKZN, and many of the ensuing controversies over the years have stemmed from objections by different parties as to the management of the university. For example, in 2006 it was reported in the media that the vice-chancellor had prevented staff from conducting a meeting to discuss transformation at the university, leading to an outcry regarding academic freedom at the university (Natal Witness, 22 June, 2006). Following this, disciplinary action taken by UKZN against two of its staff once again made the news in 2008 when the university alleged that these staff had brought the university and its incumbent vice-chancellor, Professor Makgoba, into disrepute through their communication with the media (Natal Witness, 24 November, 2008). Of note is the fact that these two staff were persecuted by university management following the voicing of their opinion regarding a meeting which the university considered confidential on the university's online discussion forum, *Change@UKZN* (Natal Witness, 22 March, 2009). To this day controversy still dogs the heels of UKZN, as the *Mail & Guardian* (28 January, 2011) reported this year on the suppression of a public audit report of UKZN, allegedly led by the vice-chancellor of the university. Besides these examples of internal strife at UKZN a number of student protests have rocked the campuses, often on a yearly basis. In 2010 and 2011, for example, students took to protesting over housing and fees at the university and which led to the disruption of classes and police intervention (S.A.P.A., 12 April, 2010, S.A.P.A., 30 March, 2011). In these examples, one may see that the transformation process at UKZN has not been a smooth one.

The existence of the *Change@UKZN* e-mail discussion list hosted on the internet by UKZN provides an opportunity to study how members of this institution navigate the delicate nature of day to day interaction within the context of an institutional online forum, fraught as it is with the dangers of appearing racist, sexist or anti-transformative to name a few. The discussion list was created with the intention of fostering a public discourse regarding the changes occurring at the University and provides a unique record of the discourse around the transformation process from members within the University system, as well as members of the public interested in the transformation process. Members of the discussion list are



predominantly drawn from the University community (including lecturers, administrative staff and students); however the discussion list is open for anyone to join who wishes to do so. The discussion list was started in June 2006 by members of the University community and as of March 2011 there were 383 subscribed members to the discussion list, 226 of whom had posted to the discussion list at least once. There were a total of 2396 postings, contained within 1008 threads of conversation, from June 2006 to the end of March 2011, with a mean of 10.6 posts per contributing member. The maximum number of posts by one individual was 135 posts over the five year time period.

By analyzing this rich source of naturally occurring discursive exchange a window of opportunity is afforded to study interactions in which prejudice, institutional reputation and much more is at stake in conversation. The online discussion list provides a physically traceable history of the discourse between participants which is not usually available to researchers, and with the advent of the internet as a facilitator of human communication and interaction it is imperative to raise awareness of the importance of the internet as a domain which can provide insight into the social practices central to human life. The history and context of the discussion list is significant to this work as since its inception comments made on the list have been used by management to monitor employees, and postings to the list have even been used as evidence for the dismissal of employees of UKZN. This local context which informs what is said and what is not, who contributes to the discussion list and who does not is of special importance as members of the list are aware that their comments are freely available for viewing and may therefore have developed shared ways of speaking on the forum which take into account this fact. This “meta-awareness” of one’s speech contributes significantly to the discursive techniques one might draw on while composing a posting to the discussion-list. Thus, a research question emerges as the *Change@UKZN* discussion list provides a rich source of data with which to study the nature of talk online, and the social practices which are reproduced within this context.

### **1.3. The Research Question**

The aim of this research, then, is to identify some of the means and methods which people employ to manage textual talk on the internet, in this case within the context of an asynchronous e-mail discussion list. Given the context of the study, race is the “elephant in

the room”, or in this case the online space, which may be pointed out at any given moment in conversation on the discussion list. Thus, the study seeks to explore the discursive techniques which members of an online discussion list employ to attend to, dis-attend (avoid) or ignore topics of discussion where race is occasioned within the context of computer mediated communication.

In order to answer these questions a discursive psychological approach is adopted, with its focus on studying how social practices (such as racial categorisation) are reproduced in the mundane arena of everyday life and ordinary language (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, Durrheim, Mtose and Brown, 2011). However, the challenge which has faced many researchers attempting to study these social practices is the difficulty in accessing naturally occurring data. As Whitehead and Lerner (2009, p. 614) state “few studies have examined the organization of racial categories in interactions in which race is invoked seemingly ‘incidentally’ in the course of whatever actions speakers are performing, rather than being elicited for research purposes, as in the case of research interviews or focus groups in which researchers prompt participants to discuss matters of race”. As such the existence of the *Change@UKZN* online discussion list provides an opportunity to study naturally occurring talk in interaction in a textual, asynchronous environment.

## **2. Literature Review**

The rise of the internet as a social phenomenon can be likened to the advent of the telegraph, radio and television and the subsequent impact these new technologies had on social life (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). The term 'internet' refers to the electronic network which links people and information, through computers and other digital devices, facilitating communication between people as well as allowing information retrieval (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman & Robinson, 2001). Since its inception the internet has had an all pervasive impact on social life, affecting the private, socio-cultural, economic and political aspects of human existence as at its core the internet deals with the very essence of humanity - communication (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). As a result of this the internet has fast become an integral part of everyday life, a background against which social life is played. With the advent of the internet as a facilitator of human communication and interaction it is vital to raise awareness of the importance of research in this online domain which can provide useful insights into the social practices fundamental to human social life. In the context of this review, the argument will be made that the internet is itself the location of discursive phenomena and that discursive social psychology may provide the framework to study these phenomena. Given that the discussion list under study occurs within the context of post-apartheid South Africa, and more specifically within a university undergoing transformation, race is potentially at stake in social interactions mediated by the discussion list. The review will go on to create a framework which discusses how race is occasioned in talk (online and otherwise) to perform specific social action, and that this is worked up in social contexts, between people. Finally, the review concludes by considering how race talk may be repressed discursively in talk in interaction.

### **2.1. The Internet as a Location of Discursive Phenomena**

The internet as a social phenomenon is often constructed as a 'recent' occurrence; however research of computer mediated communication (CMC) began as far back as 1984 (Herring, 2001). Since then there has been a deluge of research concerned with the details of how usage of the internet would shape and change communication between people due to the nature of the medium. Early research popularised the notion that all computer mediated discourse (CMD) belonged to one genre; however, research has since shown "computer mediated

language and interaction to be sensitive to a variety of technical and situational factors, making it far more complex and variable than envisioned by early descriptions” (Herring, 2001, p. 613). Of particular relevance to this review is text-based CMC, which may take multiple forms (such as e-mail, online forums and so on) and whose linguistic features depend on the kind of messaging system used to mediate conversation (ibid). The common feature of all forms of text-based CMC is the fact that all activity takes place through the use of “visually-presented” language (Herring, 2001, p. 612). This feature creates an environment devoid of other channels of communication (body language, for example), in which to study the interaction between discourse and social practices (ibid).

An important facet of the internet, and one which makes the internet particularly suited to the study of discursive social practice, is that it is in itself a discursive phenomenon comprised largely of talk and text (Stanley, 2003). Without conversation the internet would not exist as the social practices of the ‘online’ space are a collection of talk and text, and it is this aspect which parallels social life (ibid). Foucault (1980, in Herring, 2001) has theorised that societal institutions are constructed and maintained through discourse, in the internet this is distilled into an observable form as communities of users construct societal structures and enact social practices entirely out of words (Herring, 2001). In fact, as textual discursive interaction is often the only determinant of common practices within online communities the importance of conversation is undeniable as conversation becomes crucial in building ‘speech communities’ which exist through “shared rules of speaking and interpretations of speech performance” online (Bregman & Haythornthwaite, 2003, p. 118). The study of this, however, comes with added complexity as a result of the medium.

It is important to acknowledge the means by which communication on the internet is facilitated and mediated and the impact these may have on discourse. As Johnstone (2008, p. 208, in Gordon & Luke, in press) argues, “No matter what the medium of communication is, it affects the discourse that it enables or accompanies.” The fact that conversational participants are geographically dispersed and the textual nature of communication (messages have to be typed on a keyboard to be communicated) means that communication is faster than written discursive exchanges but slower and thus more pre-determined than the spontaneous nature of face-to-face conversation (Herring, 2001, Gordon & Luke, in press). Gruber (1998, p. 22) provides an apt metaphor for e-mail communication on a discussion list when he writes “the communicative situation which is referred to by the metaphor ‘email discussion’ might

be more accurately compared to the situation of a group of persons who are sitting in a dark cave: Anybody knows that there are some others and that they might (but must not) respond to one's own utterance." Thus, participants need to formulate an utterance which is relevant within the context of the discussion list and which merits a response from other participants, or else risk being excluded from the discussion if this norm of relevancy is not maintained (ibid). A means for overcoming this is that participants in an e-mail discussion list will initiate a topic through the statement of a question (ibid). Although this is atypical of adult discourse, this "might be due to the specific communicative situation of e-mail discourse where communicators formulate messages (moves) for an audience they do not know, and, additionally, whose attention and interest they cannot take for granted" (Gruber, 1998, p.30). Relevancy is thus a crucial factor in determining how participants communicate and respond to one another within the context of an online discussion list. However, this is not without its challenges.

Apart from the problematic of maintaining relevancy there is also the challenge of turn-taking in online conversation due to the limitations imposed and created by computer mediated discourse (Gruber, 1998, Herring, 2001). In contrast to face-to-face communication where most often speakers speak one after the other, in asynchronous discussion there may be lengthy gaps between exchanges and different contributors to an e-mail discussion may contribute messages which refer not only to the previous turn but to multiple previous messages and which fragment interaction, moving from a sequential interaction to a matrix of interrelated exchanges (Gruber, 1998; Herring, 2001). Thus, participants of an e-mail discussion list face problems of dislocated turn adjacency and a lack of immediate feedback from participants of the exchange (Herring, 2001). Herring (ibid) notes that one method which participants of an e-mail exchange use to overcome the problem of turn-taking is that of *addressivity*. What this means is that participants will clearly address their post to a particular participant, similar in structure to that of a letter (for example, in the form of: Dear X, I agree with your statement... and so on). Furthermore, participants also make use of linking, which is the act of referring explicitly to the content of a previous message in their own contribution and which also does the job of maintaining relevancy to the topic at hand (ibid). The extensive use of direct quoting from previous messages is another method which participants of a discussion may use to "create the illusion of adjacency in that it incorporates and juxtaposes (portions of) two turns – and initiation and a response- within a single message" (Herring, 2001, p. 620). Quoting too maintains relevancy, as the connections

created and made explicit through the use of extracts makes clear for the audience the links between the current post and the previous discussion (Gruber, 1998). Furthermore, direct quoting shows that the author is aware that their contribution is not only of interest to the person to whom they are responding, but that there is a silent audience who may be interested in the discussion but may need a point of reference to understand the current discourse (ibid).

Another important aspect of textual communication mediated by the internet is that of the loss of verbal cues (such as tone and pitch of voice) and temporal non-verbal cues (such as body language), (Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia & Haythornthwaite, 1996; Gordon & Luke, in press). In fact, computer mediated conversation is often referred to as a lean medium of communication, that is, it lacks other communicative cues such as eye-contact and auditory expression (Herring, 2001). Verbal and non-verbal cues combine to contextualize an interaction, without these people are sometimes unable to interpret an utterance and this leads to misunderstandings, especially when it comes to the absence of tone and cadence of speech (Gordon & Luke, in press). Thus members of online communities on the internet are required to find textual alternatives, such as the creative use of punctuation and use of capital letters (ibid). However, the existence of such limitations does not mean that discourse conducted on the internet is of little value for discursive analysis as there is still much which can be garnered through the study of interaction online.

Previous studies have shown that features common to everyday verbal communication are present in communication conducted over the internet (Fitzpatrick & Donnelly, 2010). Of particular importance is the fact that inter-subjective meaning is constructed between participants in communication on the internet in much the same way as it is in verbal communication. By drawing on shared knowledge participants in an online discussion are able to contextualize their talk and infer meaning from one another. This is often achieved through repetition (Gordon & Luke, in press), similar to echoing in verbal discourse participants in an online conversation will show that they have understood previous statements by repeating and adding to what has been said by others. This constructs involvement between conversational participants and it is this which binds the community of practice together as connectedness amongst members of the speech community is created (ibid). The constructed nature of the dialog thus creates interpersonal involvement between participants who are not necessarily co-present as well as drawing the audience into making inferences and associations as a result of speaker's narratives (ibid). This collaborative nature

of discourse online thus provides a rich and fertile ground in which to situate discursive studies of human interaction, as language forms the sole backbone for social action on the internet.

Besides the loss of contextual cues in conversation, the fact that communications enacted online are often saved means that “conversations are no longer ephemeral; they are instead *persistent conversations*, captured at the moment of delivery, and remaining available to be reviewed and replayed” (Bregman & Haythornthwaite, 2003, p.119). Persistent conversation in this context is defined by Bregman and Haythornthwaite (2003) as conversation which is stored and available for others to view and reproduce. The majority of members of online communities are aware of this persistence of communication, and this may affect what is said and what is not in interactions conducted on the internet as the accessibility of prior utterances leaves open the possibility that previous talk may be used in current conversation to perform a variety of actions (ibid).

## **2.2. Discursive Social Psychology and the Study of Talk**

Discursive social psychology provides a useful theoretical framework with which to begin to understand and analyse talk in interaction, and as the current study is concerned with the management of talk online an account of the discursive social psychological approach shall be given here. Discursive social psychology is a school of thought which deviates from the traditional psychological stance which posits that talk is merely a communicative tool used to express the world ‘inside’ the speaker, that is their thoughts and intentions, to others (Edwards, 2003). Whilst other forms of psychological theory assume that there is an external reality which provides input and is reflected within individuals’ mind, discursive psychology instead concerns itself with the ways in which reality and mind are constructed by social actors in language, in the course of their everyday activities (Potter & Edwards, 2001).

Discourse, within the context of discursive social psychology, is defined by Potter and Edwards (2001, p.103) as “talk and texts, studied as social practices.” In this the relationship between “mind” and “world” is studied as a discourse topic “that is, as a participants’ concern, a matter of talk’s business, talk’s categories, talk’s rhetoric, and talk’s current interactional concerns” (Edwards 2003, p. 31). As Potter and Wetherell (1987) note,

discursive psychology does not attempt to treat language as a conduit into the minds of people, nor is it assumed that language reflects the “true” inner state of the individual. Rather, they posit that language is used for a diverse number of functions, that language is both constructed and constructive, that language can be used to describe the same occurrence in a variety of ways and that this will therefore lead to a wide variation in accounts (ibid). This variation is important, as “the constructive and flexible ways in which language is used should themselves become a central topic of study” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p.35). Construction of discourse is an important concept in discursive psychology, and is viewed as “the process of assembling and stabilizing versions to make them factual and independent of their producer” (Potter & Edwards, 2001, p. 106). Construction in this sense is not only the fact that talk is made up of words, expressions, grammar and so on, but also that discourse has the power to construct different versions of the world (ibid.). Thus the ways in which specific versions of social practice are constructed in talk becomes the focus of study, as does the work or activity which these constructions of talk attempt to perform (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Following on from this, the discursive social psychological approach conceives that discourse is occasioned, that is, “talk and texts are embedded in some kind of sequence of interaction and in some kind of context” (Potter & Edwards, 2001, p. 104). In this argument, talk is pervasively rhetorical in nature, descriptions and accounts are designed to counter any potential alternative accounts given by other speakers (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Potter and Edwards (2001) also argue that discourse is action-oriented. Action, in this sense, is the collection of practical and technical interpersonal tasks members of a society enact everyday while going about their lives (ibid.). Action orientation then is the emphasis that every act of discourse, be it a factual or descriptive account, a question, an invitation and so on, is performing some kind of social action at that moment in time (ibid). Thus, every construction of discourse is designed to perform some sort of social action.

To put discursive social psychology in context, it will be useful to illustrate the underlying theory of discursive social psychology within attitude research. The study of psychological theory such as attitudes and prejudice has a long and varied history, with a myriad of different theories emerging over time to explain the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of attitudes. In particular prejudiced attitudes were of especial interest to researchers, often measured with attitude scales designed to identify and quantify this phenomenon (Billig, 1988). The



landmark study of the expression of prejudiced attitude conducted by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) argued that ‘true’ prejudiced feelings were located ‘inside’ the individual, hidden so that the individual seemed to outwardly adhere to the social norms of tolerance. This early research of the denial of prejudice gave rise to two presumptions, firstly, that displays of prejudice only occur in situations in which people are thinking or talking exclusively about race and, secondly, that what is occurring in these situations has to do with the expression or suppression of beliefs located within the individual psyche (Condor, 2006). However, the focus of investigation has since as a result of discursive social psychology shifted from prejudiced attitudes as an intrapsychic phenomenon to that of an interpersonal and linguistic process (Barnes, Palmary & Durrheim, 2001).

As mentioned, discursive psychology approaches talk as a form of social action and sense making, and treats discourse as “a research topic in its own right, rather than treating it as a transparent medium through which the ‘real facts’ of attitudes, events or behaviors can be recovered” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p.184). Discourse is then an *activity* in which people situated in a social world engage, achieving a multitude of ends with their talk, and the discursive psychological approach is principally concerned with explaining discursive actors’ practices (the *what* and the *how* of these practices), rather than their internal motivations. Moreover, this approach analyzes talk predominantly for its social and interactional significance in a certain context at a given time, rather than for what it may reveal about an individual (Whitehead & Lerner, 2009). Thus, the discursive psychological approach does not try to “see if people are prejudiced, whether openly or behind the camouflage of their talk” (Edwards, 2003, p.32). Instead expressions of talk, such as racial stereotypes for example, are approached as something that is attended to in various ways by social actors in the arena of activity that is talk.

### **2.3. Shared Knowledge in Discourse**

The expression of racial stereotypes in today’s society is taboo and frowned upon as it breaks the norms of tolerance and acceptance (Billig, 1988, van Dijk, 1992). The social actor who employs the use of racial stereotypes in conversation consequently runs the risk of being held accountable for breaking the aforesaid norms. This begs the question of how these stereotypes and racial categorisations are perpetuated within society’s discourse, and the

following section will show that expressions in discourse are a collaborative effort made possible, firstly, through the use of common-sense knowledge and secondly, through the creation of inter-subjective meaning between conversational participants.

Common-sense knowledge is defined by Garfinkel (1956, p.185, in Whitehead, 2009, p.321) as the “socially sanctioned grounds of inference and action that people use in everyday life, and which they assume that other members of the group use in the same way.” Common-sense knowledge allows members of a society to make sense of the world around them, to infer meaning from others’ actions and also how to respond to these actions (Durrheim, Mtose & Brown, 2011). Social membership categories form an important part of the common-sense knowledge of a society, as membership categories can serve to organize and act as a repository for common-sense knowledge about certain social membership categories (Sacks, 1992, Schegloff, 2007b). As a result of this a reference to a category in conversation can be treated as an explanation of social action as this reference activates the common-sense knowledge about that category (Sacks, 1992, Whitehead, 2009). The use of racial stereotypes in conversation is an example of a reference to a membership category and the resultant mobilization of the common-sense knowledge evoked through the reference to a stereotype to explain the actions of others. Moreover, the use of categories to account for social action is treated by speakers and participants alike as a routine and unproblematic feature of talk, and it is the fact that categories are always accessible as a social resource of sorts that “enables people to talk about and make sense of their everyday activities in apparently smooth and seamless ways, since categories enable the recognisability and sensibility of actions” (Whitehead, 2009, p.327). In this manner discursive participants are able to infer much when a social membership category is explicitly evoked in conversation, treating the category as an unproblematic explanation for social action (ibid).

The use of membership categories to explain others’ actions, however, is not evoked without difficulty. Although the use of categories in talk is treated as a mundane feature of everyday discourse the speaker who makes explicit references to certain categories, such as racial categories and stereotypes, to mobilize common-sense racial knowledge to explain another’s actions can reflexively provide a basis for listeners to use the speaker’s *own* racial membership category as an explanation for the speaker’s actions (Whitehead, 2009). In this way common-sense knowledge about the speaker is mobilized, and this in turn may be used to explain the speaker’s actions. To illustrate, “a white speaker who simply identifies the race

of a person of color in describing some action that person performed may be labeled ‘racist’ specifically by virtue of being seen (and heard) *as a white person* attributing a person of color’s actions to that person’s racial identity (and thus as using common sense racial knowledge to explain those actions)” (Whitehead, 2009, p.328). By making the racial category of a another person salient when communicating that person’s actions to others what the speaker may be saying could be discounted as racially motivated or racially biased by the audience on the basis of the speaker’s own racial category membership (ibid). The consequence of this is other means of expression may need to be employed by speakers who wish to use category membership to evoke common-sense knowledge when recounting the social actions of others.

To understand how speakers may use membership categories to evoke common-sense knowledge to explain the actions of others it is useful to draw on the work of Edwards (2004), which attempts to explain the creation of inter-subjective meaning between conversational participants. Edwards (2004) argues that because words have multiple potential meanings the listener must draw on common-sense knowledge to make sense of what is being said, in the context within which it is uttered. Furthermore, as talk does not consist of a series of disconnected remarks a cooperative effort is required of the speaker and audience to ensure that all participants involved in the discourse understand one another (Grice, 1975). In order to ensure that all participants in a conversation understand one another inter-subjectivity is built up collaboratively between the speaker and the listeners, and the speaker is consequently responsible for ensuring that listeners have heard them correctly. Listeners on their part are required to show their recognition of a place, object or person either by explicitly stating so or through providing further information of their own (Edwards, 2004). By doing this any misunderstanding can be rectified smoothly on the fly (what conversation analysts call “repair”) and the discourse allowed to flow (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977, p. 361). Therefore the display of inter-subjectivity is critical as it is this which links speakers and listeners to one another, the bond which holds everyday conversation together (ibid). In addition, inter-subjectivity is a collaborative process produced in talk and text as a performative part of situated social action and common-sense knowledge thus becomes the backdrop which listeners use to make sense of a speaker’s utterance (Durrheim, in press).

Following the explanation given above as to how common-sense knowledge and inter-subjective understanding play a crucial role in discourse the next step is to show how these two facets of discursive interaction play a role in the expression of racial categorisation and stereotypes in talk. As mentioned earlier, speakers who employ the use of membership categories to explain social actions run the risk of being accused themselves of prejudice and having their talk discounted based on this (Whitehead, 2009). In order to avoid this one might think that speakers would avoid mentioning social category memberships (such as race) at all in their talk. However, as racial category memberships are a part of society's common sense knowledge, failing to mention race does not mean that an audience will not interpret a speaker's words in a racially defined way and thus the speaker who does not take this into account is likely to encounter many difficulties in the interaction (ibid). There is a way around this shortfall, and that is the fact that speakers can evoke racial category membership implicitly (Durrheim, in press). By gesturing towards a racial category membership in conversation the speaker can "force listeners to supply the common sense knowledge required to hear race as (obviously and apparently) relevant for understanding what happened, thus making them complicit in that racial common sense" (Whitehead, 2009, p. 338). In this way speakers do not need to explicitly articulate the racial category membership they wish to make salient in the conversation and as a result speakers can use a racial category membership to explain the actions of others while preventing the inference that they themselves are doing so from a racially motivated position (Durrheim, in press, Whitehead, 2009). Durrheim (in press, n.p) notes that in this way "the unutterable stereotypes are gestured toward in forms of expression in which they are simultaneously revealed and hidden", thus referring to social category memberships in this way requires a genuinely collaborative effort from both speaker and audience. In this way the audience is complicit in 'hearing race' when no such explicit links were made by the speaker to explain a social action, which means that any accusations of racial prejudice can always be denied by the speaker (ibid).

This illustrates the collaborative nature of the expression of racial category membership and stereotypes in talk. The use of implicit gestures towards a social membership category to explain the actions of social actors is not a phenomenon which takes place within the psyche of the individual, rather, it is something that takes place between social actors as it is the listeners of a discourse who are needed to understand the meaning of the implicit gestures (Durrheim, in press, Whitehead, 2009).

### 2.3. Race Talk as Discursive Social Activity

A corollary of viewing discourse as a means to perform social action is that the use of seemingly 'prejudiced' expressions of talk, such as racial stereotypes, are reproduced in talk in interaction, and that this shifts the focus from regarding these expressions as an individualistic, internal process to a social phenomenon (Billig, 1988). As discourse occurs fairly spontaneously in daily social life, expressions of stereotypes and race may be uttered with a more mundane matter in mind relating to the specific local context in which it occurs (Condor, 2006).

In order to understand 'context' one must appreciate that each episode of talk is not constituted of an isolated, disconnected moment in time (Condor, 2006). Goffman (1986, in Condor, 2006, p. 9) notes that: "it is obvious that in most 'situations' many different things are happening simultaneously - things that are likely to have begun at different moments and may terminate dissynchronously. To ask the question 'what is it that's going on here?' biases matters in the direct of unitary exposition and simplicity." Thus, conversational participants as social actors are attending to and orienting themselves towards a myriad of different concerns and actions within conversation, whilst located in a specific context of time and space (ibid). The meaning of an act then depends on the framing of the situation in which that act occurs and the occasioning of race in conversation cannot be taken at face value as the social context within which it occurs informs the reason for making use of racial discourse, be it racial categorisation or stereotyping, in the conversation at that moment in time and in that particular situation (Potter & Edwards, 2001). Therefore, the communicative, contextually located and activity related function of race talk in discourse must be taken into consideration (Condor, 2006; Potter & Edwards, 2001).

The import of this is that the expression of race talk in discourse is rhetorical in nature and the deployment of racial stereotypes in conversation, for example, may be doing the work of strategic social action. Condor (2006, p. 15) argues that "racially or ethnically prejudiced talk may also be used to perform a wide range of communicative functions: to amuse, to seize the floor, to exclude, to shock, to mark intimacy, to key informality, to display freedom from normative constraint or simply to pass the time." If this perspective of race talk in discourse is taken, one can begin to understand that these expressions are "occasioned" in talk to perform a specific social action (Potter & Edwards, 2001). Condor (2006) has shown that

speakers may make use of racial stereotypes to seize the discursive floor, in the form of amplification. What this means is that while one speaker would occasion a racial stereotype in conversation the next speaker would take that stereotype and make their own addition to the expression, amplifying the explicit nature of the stereotype. In an example of this, Condor (2006) showed how a participant in an interview would begin by referring to a particular ethnic group, such as the Welsh, and how this would be followed by another speaker who would express an explicit stereotype about that ethnic group, in this particular example by referring to them as “sheep shaggers” (Condor, 2006, p. 12). This served to demonstrate how participants in the interview used explicit racial stereotyping and amplification to exclude the interviewer from the conversation, through racial stereotyping the participants in the conversation constructed a discursive space of which only they were a part of (intimacy) and which allowed them to hold the conversational floor.

In order to understand just how expressions of race play a part in the performance of social actions, one may look at the public expression of racial stereotypes. Durrheim (in press) argues that racial stereotypes are not just archaic remnants of an earlier time which, if left unheeded, seep into behavior. Instead, racial stereotypes are resources which do much rhetorical work such as justifying and explaining ones actions as well as explaining the actions of others (Whitehead, 2009, Durrheim, in press). Condor (2006, p.8) notes that in everyday conversation “people may not necessarily be concerned about convincing others of their vision of the social world”, and thus explicit expressions of stereotypes, instead of reflecting the inner thoughts or beliefs of individuals, represent strategic social action oriented toward self-presentation located within a specific interactional context (ibid). Personal accountability then becomes a crucial feature of the public expression of stereotypes as the employment of stereotypes in a social setting cannot be taken at face-value, for, in expressing negative stereotypes social actors run the risk of creating further rhetorical problems (Durrheim, in press). As van Dijk (1992, p. 89) argues: “Language users who say negative things about minorities are well aware of the fact that they may be understood as breaking the social norm of tolerance and acceptance”. This means that the speaker who expresses potentially discriminatory views “must be ready to search for, and find, suitable reasons” for doing so (Billig, 1988, p.103). Thus, considerable discursive creativity is required of the speaker who wishes to present a non-racial basis for using speech which may be construed as racially discriminatory by listeners (ibid).

This leads to the next point, and that is the fact that expressions of stereotypes and race talk are in practice articulated within the context of everyday social encounters (Condor, 2006). The implication of this is that because language is a shared social activity then these expressions must occur within the discursive space between conversational participants and is therefore not concealed within the individuals' psyche where it may leak into social life if left untended, as was first assumed by early studies of attitudes and racism (Billig, 1988). The fact that language is a social activity enacted between members of a society infers that the responsibilities for the public expressions of racial categorisation and stereotypes are shared jointly amongst the speaker and "those other co-present individuals who occasion, reinforce or simply fail to suppress it" (Condor, Figgou, Abell, Gibson & Stevenson, 2006, p.441). Therefore a speaker who publicly expresses racial stereotypes may only do so if they are afforded an opportunity by the audience to do so, by allowing the speaker to take and hold the discursive floor as well as providing reinforcement (such as through the use of discursive markers of agreement) other interlocutors collaborate to work up and sustain discourse in which racial talk is articulated (Condor, 2006). Besides sustaining talk in which racial stereotypes are occasioned, it has also been demonstrated that conversational participants may even actively collaborate to protect their fellow interlocutors from potential accusations of prejudice by suppressing or mitigating talk which they believe may be construed as prejudiced (Billig, 1998; Condor et al., 2006).

Thus we can see that the occasioning of race in talk serves a multitude of social functions and can only occur if other social actors, in the form of an audience, allow the speaker to continue to hold the discursive floor (Condor, et al., 2006). Through this it is demonstrated that expressions of race and racial stereotyping are situated within social contexts, and are a result of the collaboration between social actors.

## **2.4. Discourse and Repression**

An important contribution to the field of study which examines discourse and the public expression of race talk is that of Billig's (1998; 1999) re-interpretation of Freud's work on repression and the unconscious and its application to discursive psychology. This portion of the review will explain this re-interpretation and show how the repression of race talk is a discursive phenomenon, enacted in a social context between social actors.

A critical facet of repression is Freud's notion of an unconscious. To introduce the notion of 'consciousness' and an 'unconscious' at this point in the argument seems contradictory to the principles of discursive psychology which have informed the review thus far. In Freud's works the unconscious is described as a ghostly entity embedded in the mind of the individual, whose distinguishing feature was that a thought or desire had been repressed, prevented from entering conscious thought (Billig, 2006). The definition of repression, then, in the Freudian sense described the process whereby people drive from their conscious thought shameful ideas that then become stored in their unconscious (Billig, 1999). However, it is possible to reinterpret repression to show that it is in fact a discursive activity and not the workings of an entity situated within the individual's mind (ibid).

Drawing on classical rhetorical theory to explain the nature of human thought Billig (1998, p. 200) argues that to think is to engage in argument, and thus "the rhetoric of argumentation provides the means of thought: it permits topics to be opened up for public debate, and, by extension, for the internal debates of solitary thought." Burkitt (2010b, p.323) makes the case for the notion of a dialogical consciousness when he argues that it is the influence of the voices of others which forms our "own self and micro-dialogue, creating an 'otherness' within us—a voice or tone—that is not associated with speaking as 'I' or 'me' (the self as conscious knower or known object)." If this is so and there is a basis for understanding consciousness as a dialog (hence dialogical), by extension there is an argument for claiming a 'dialogic unconscious'. As a result the 'unconscious' becomes that which does not enter communication, either with ourselves or with one another (ibid). Fundamental to this formulation of consciousness and the unconscious are the skills of language which in turn has at its core the skills of argument (or rhetoric) (Billig, 2006). This is because, as discursive psychology argues, language is not merely a means for individuals to represent and label an external reality but is rhetorical in nature and provides social actors with the means to justify, criticize and negate (ibid). In short, language provides the means for thought, and this thinking is methodologically observable in everyday conversation between social actors.

By extension, if rhetoric provides the means for thought then it must provide the means for thoughts to be avoided, ignored and thus repressed (Billig, 2006). Language is therefore at the same time both expressive and repressive, as it provides the means to open conversational topics for discussion and debate as well as a means to close down the discussion (Durrheim et



al., 2011). In this way, for every discursive attempt to move a conversation in certain directions there must exist rhetorical means which allow speakers to curb this talk from entering unwanted conversational territory (Billig, 1999). The reason for this is drawn from Freud's hypotheses that it was thoughts of the taboo, shame, guilt and desires which were repressed by the individual. In Freudian theory it was better that these thoughts never enter conscious thought and so were repressed and stored in the unconscious of the individual (ibid). In the discursive notion of repression conversation is regulated "by the social rules of politeness, which help to regulate the smooth flow of conversation" (Durrheim et al., 2011), and thus social actors have need to curtail and repress notions and desires which would disrupt this smooth flow of conversation. Repression in talk therefore needs to take place before such disruptions occur, preventing the need for denials and rationalizations later on (ibid).

One of the ways this is achieved is by changing the topic of conversation, moving discursive exchanges away from potentially contentious topics, as directing attention onto a particular set of topics becomes a way of avoiding others (Billig, 2006). This shows how acts of repression become habitual and occur below the collective social awareness, as changing topics of conversation occur all the time in interactions between people. It is interesting to note how topics of conversation are changed and using the techniques afforded by conversation analysis Billig (1999) has shown that topic shifts are achieved through the use of words called 'discontinuity markers'. These are non-descript words such as 'anyway' and 'but', and which are routinely used in discourse to indicate that a shift in conversational direction is about to take place. The fact that these discontinuity markers are non-descript and routinely used is an important factor in achieving dialogical repression, as speakers need to employ words which point to a new topic but do not become the topic of conversation themselves (Billig, 2006). If they did become the topic of conversation themselves, then they have failed in their task of shifting the conversation, for as Billig (2006, p.21) notes "in pointing to the topic they are pointing away from themselves" and if this were not so the act of repression could not take place. Thus a new topic is always needed to replace the topic from which the speaker would like to shift, as, if there is no new topic the conversation will return to the original topic of conversation (ibid).

Another means for repression, linked to topic shifting, is avoidance of topics in conversation. One of the earliest observations of this occurring comes from Grice (1975), who in writing

about the logic of conversation argued that at each stage of an exchange certain conversational moves are excluded as conversationally unsuitable and therefore avoided by participants in the exchange. In this avoidance topics of conversation which are deemed too problematic may never be touched upon, and thus never enter conscious dialogical thought and so a 'dialogic unconscious' is achieved. The implication of a dialogic unconscious means that analysts need to take into consideration both what is said in conversation and what is *not* said, as Durrheim et al., (2011, p.178) state: "every act of expression leaves something out and is thus also always an act of repression." To understand this one must also understand that for every utterance a speaker makes there exist an infinity of different utterances which can now never fill that conversational space, any potential utterances which might have been said instead will now never be uttered again in that moment of time (Billig, 1999). Therefore, any act of expression may be an act of repression at the same time, as utterances fill space that can now never be filled by another utterance.

It is important to note that this is not achieved individually, as sometimes speakers may engage in the joint activity of avoidance to ensure that certain ways of talking are repressed in a certain context (Billig, 2006). This joint activity is dependent on the existence of shared knowledge, as knowledge of the taboo topic to be avoided is collectively constructed through a series of absences, an empty space which contains the shades of the unsaid words (Durrheim et al., 2011). By gesturing towards an action based on racial category membership, for example, using "metaphorical and metonymic associations" (Durrheim, in press, n.p) in discourse speakers are able to draw in their audience to infer meanings and make associations without ever explicitly stating so. Through this shared knowledge, knowledge of the topic to be avoided is dialogically constructed between the speaker and the audience and it is in this interplay between speaker and audience where we can observe that repression is a result of discursive collaboration between members of society (Durrheim et al., 2011).

## **2.6. Conclusion**

As dialog between participants on the internet takes the form of a truly collaborative process, this review has demonstrated how the study of the management of talk online may provide researchers with the opportunity to study shared patterns of discourse. Furthermore, as a result of the persistence of communication on the internet, researchers are granted the ability

to access discourse which would normally be lost once uttered. This ability to retrieve stored conversation becomes an invaluable asset when studying the management of talk in interaction. Drawing on theory covered in this review, which adopts at its foundation the discursive social psychological approach, this review attempts to create a basis for the application of theory to study talk online in a context where race may be occasioned in conversation to perform social action. By applying a discursive psychological theoretical approach the performative, action oriented aspects of managing race talk online becomes the object of study, and the ways and means in which this is constructed in an environment based solely of discourse is of particular interest.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Theoretical Perspective**

This study was qualitative in nature, situated within the social constructionist paradigm and drew much theory from the discursive psychological school of thought. These three aspects which informed the theoretical perspective of the study will be elucidated further.

The social constructionist paradigm grew out of opposition to the prevalence of positivist thinking which had dominated much of psychological thought (Gergen, 1985). In general terms, positivist-empiricist research attempts to discover the ‘truth’ of a phenomenon and is based on the belief that there is a single unitary truth which explains the nature of reality (ibid). In contrast “social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (Gergen, 1985, p.266). This view is repeated by Burkitt (2010a) who goes on to state that language and communication between people is a central facet of social constructionism, and that it is in linguistic interaction where human social life takes place. Gergen (1985, p.268) argues that “Forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage. Descriptions and explanations of the world themselves constitute forms of social action.” Social constructionism thus views language and communication as an essential part of human life, as it is in these through which shared meaning and understanding are ‘constructed’ between members of society.

Discursive psychological theory is one of many theoretical positions situated within the context of the social constructionist paradigm, and will be discussed further as it informs much of the basis for the research undertaken in the current study. Discursive psychology adopts the social constructionist position that language and communication is a domain of human activity, rather than the expression of thoughts or mental states within the individual (Edwards, 2006). Potter and Edwards (2001, p.103) argue that discursive psychology is an approach that “takes the action-oriented and reality-constructing features of discourse as fundamental.” As much of social life is experienced only through linguistic accounts enacted between members of society, one can begin to see that linguistic accounts ‘construct’ reality

(Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In this sense one can begin to understand that “discourse is the prime currency of interaction, and if we are studying persons embedded in practices then discourse will be central to that study” (Potter & Edwards, 2001, p.104). Adopting a discursive psychological approach to inform methodological decisions in the current study made sense in light of the medium which would be susceptible to analysis.

The study of social interaction, especially in the discursive psychological approach, often uses interviews, political speeches and newspaper articles as its primary source of data as these are some of the naturally occurring records of discursive interaction (Condor, 2006, Potter & Edwards, 2001). The internet is another, fairly new, domain in which human social interaction occurs and this occurs largely through textual conversational exchanges which the internet facilitates (Bregman & Haythornwaite, 2003; Stanley, 2003). The internet can thus be seen as “a discursively constituted phenomena: a collection of talk and texts as social practices” (Stanley, 2003, p. 95). Therefore, situating the study within the theoretical ambit of a school of thought which is oriented to talk-in-interaction and the empirical analysis thereof was deemed best suited to inform methodological implications for the current study.

Following on from this, a qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate. A qualitative research design foregoes statistical techniques and inferences in favour of interpretation and description in order to gain an understanding of “how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 8; Silverman, 2004). An important fact to note is that the data for this research is “naturally occurring” data, that is data which occurs without any researcher intervention and the analysis of which is informed by a qualitative research design (Silverman, 2004, p. 120).

### **3.2. Sampling**

The sample for this research consisted of all the postings of active members to the *Change@UKZN* online discussion-list hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) which has undergone structural transformation in post-Apartheid South Africa.

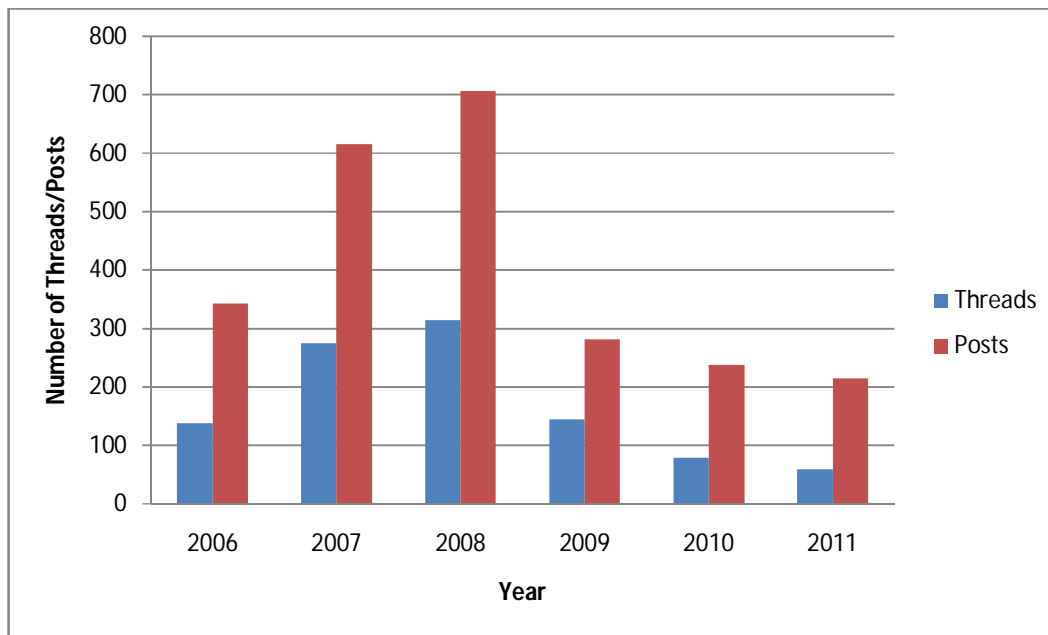


Table 1.1: Illustration of the number of threads and posts contributed to the discussion list over time.

Table 1.1 graphically depicts the number of threads and posts created on the discussion list by year. The low thread and post count in years 2006 and 2011 can be attributed to the fact that the discussion list was only active from June 2006, and that the study only collected data up to March of 2011. One can also see that the discussion list was most active in 2007 and 2008, with 275 threads containing 615 posts created in 2007 and 314 threads containing 706 posts created in 2008 respectively. Activity on the discussion list declined rapidly in 2009 and 2010, following the use of postings to the discussion list as evidence in a disciplinary action taken against two employees of UKZN.

Over the course of the discussion list timeline, members who posted often and prolifically emerged as the ‘core’ of this online community. In order to be considered as a regular contributing member of the community for the purposes of this study a minimum of 10 posts (derived from the average number of posts submitted per member) had to have been submitted to the discussion list, any member who submitted less than 10 posts was categorised as a non-member of the regular contributing community. All threads where a non-member of the ‘core’ community contributed, in addition to the contributions by core members, to the discussion were selected for analysis as these threads provide a contrast to threads in which ‘normative’ modes of discursive exchange take place. It was hypothesised

that the introduction of a non-regular participant to the conversation meant that regular members of the community would need to make more explicit use of discursive management techniques when the new member joined the conversation.

### **3.3. Data Collection**

The archives for the discussion list are available to the public for download and review. All archived contributions made by members of the discussion list were collected via download from the site archives, from June 2006 up until the end of March 2011. These archives were entered into QSR Nvivo 8, a software package used for qualitative data analysis.

At this point it would be useful to illustrate just how a discussion list works. Broadly speaking there are two kinds of textual communication methods which are largely used by people to converse over the internet. The first is instantaneous “chat” where messages are sent and displayed in real time as they are written and responded to (examples include Instant Relay Chat or IRC). The other is via traditional e-mail, which is known as an asynchronous communication method. The term ‘asynchronous’ is used to denote the fact that although messages are sent instantly they are not displayed instantly to all members of the discussion, but rather may be contained in an e-mail form and so there may be a substantial delay between sending and receiving of messages. Furthermore when participants reply they do so in an ‘isolation’ of sorts, that is, they may compose and send their contribution to the discussion at the same time as others without seeing replies from other members first. Postings to the discussion list are archived by the list administrator by categorising them into “threads” or topics. Members will start a thread by e-mailing the topic they wish to discuss to all members of the discussion list, using the subject line to provide a sense of the topic contained within the e-mail. Those members who wish to respond do so by using the original subject line, by doing this multiple threads can be conducted at once without confusion as to which topic a member is responding.

Each thread on the discussion list is thus a self-contained conversation, although a new thread might refer back to older threads or grow out of and run parallel to the thread from which it originated. Conversely, a reply may go unattended by other members of the discussion list who may then go on to reply to a different posting in the thread. In this one can see the

organic nature of conversations conducted via the discussion list, as participants of the discussion list orient themselves to the discourse at hand. Furthermore, by treating each thread as a separate case in the Nvivo software package greater coherence and organisation was achieved as threads could be labelled and numbered. In this way the threads acted as a repository for relevant posts.

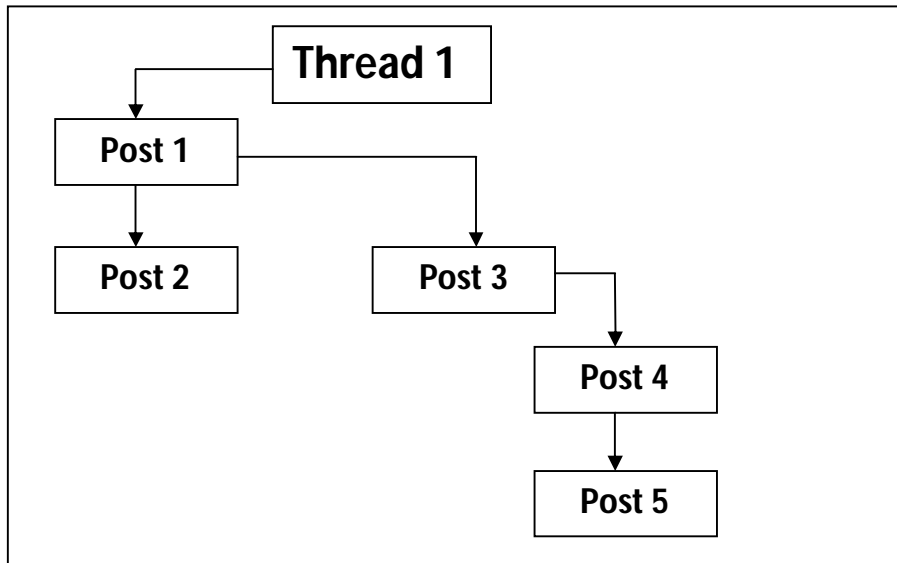


Figure 1.1: An illustration of the structure of a conversation on a discussion list

### 3.4. Validity, Reliability and Generalizability

In research it is important to show methodological rigour. In quantitative research this is displayed by the reliability, validity and generalizability of results. As Silverman (2004, p.210) notes “short of reliable methods and valid conclusions, research descends into a bedlam.” As such it is important that quality in research is maintained, especially if employing a qualitative methodology. A common error is for a qualitative study to slip into anecdotalism, where only a few exemplary cases of the phenomenon are presented from the data (ibid). One of the ways in which validity in the current study was ensured was through the use of the constant comparative method (Silverman, 2004). The constant comparative method means that the researcher always makes an attempt to find another case in the data with which to test out a provisional hypothesis. By applying a hypothesis to multiple occurrences a case for the validity of the hypothesis can be made (ibid). Thus the following steps were followed when conducting the analysis: firstly, an initial reading of the postings to



the discussion list was conducted to identify over-arching analytical themes and categories, secondly, a division of the data relating to themes and categories relevant to the specific aims of the analysis were selected (this was done inclusively to ensure that all data, even that which appeared only vaguely related to the aims, were not overlooked), thirdly, a close reading of the selected subset of data was undertaken to develop working hypotheses, fourth, these hypotheses were tested by repeated close readings and coding of the postings, and lastly, an additional reading of the entire data set to ensure that the arguments derived were consistent with all of the data available. Furthermore, it is important to note that these steps took place in a cyclical iteration and not linearly as the steps were constantly moved between in order to construct the final argument (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Whitehead & Wittig, 2004).

In order to demonstrate the validity and credibility of the results obtained it is important to demonstrate reliability (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985, in Babbie & Mouton, 2005) argue that the demonstration of ‘trustworthiness’ is an essential facet of qualitative research, demonstrated in the neutrality of the findings. A method for demonstrating this is through the use of ‘thick description’ which is the comprehensive reproduction of the data in the report which allows the reader to extrapolate and make their own interpretations from the data (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Silverman (2004) refers to these as ‘low inference descriptors’, which include detailed accounts of the data (preferably reported verbatim) as well as long data extracts. In this way the reader is able to identify exactly how the researcher came to the conclusions reported.

The generalisability of a study typically refers to the extent which results from the study can be statistically ‘generalised’ to the wider population of interest (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). The extent to which this can occur in a qualitative study has often been the source of debate in the social sciences. Edelson, however, makes the case that all science is interested in “abstracting out aspects of reality – properties of interest (ultimately variables) – in order to investigate just the relations between or among these” and that this is applicable whether the domain under study is “a single person, single cultural object or a single society, organisation, group or family” (1988, in Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.105). Therefore, the generalisation of findings in this study are rather described in terms of what “discursive practices and rhetorical constructions are possible, or hold currency, within a community or culture, rather than the degree to which these practices are used by many, or all, members of

the target population” (Whitehead & Wittig, 2004, p. 270). This approach is sustained by Peräkylä (1997) who posits that “the possibilities of various practices can be considered generalizable even if the practices are not actualised in similar ways across different settings” (in Silverman, 2001, p.109). In other words, as a result of the socially shared nature of discourse, there exist comparable potential uses of language in a multitude of settings.

### **3.5. Data analysis**

The analysis of the data in this study adopted a discursive ethnomethodological approach and drew on many techniques from discourse analysis as well as conversation analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992). By assuming such an approach the analysis did not treat utterances by participants as a representation of their inner mental states (i.e. what they were thinking), but rather assumed an action oriented approach, focusing on what participants were doing with their speech and how they were doing it (ibid). The following sections will show just how discursive ethnomethodology adapts discourse and conversation analysis into a coherent form of analysis.

Most importantly, the textual nature of the medium had to be taken into consideration. Ten Have, (1999, in Gibson, 2009) has postulated that in writing we learn to create structures which direct the attention of the reader, and it is the construction of these structures which are of interest and to which principles of discursive ethnomethodology can be applied. Ten Have (1999, in Gibson, 2009) has also argued that applying an ethnomethodological conversation analytic framework may be useful when studying discourse conducted over the internet in discussion forums. This is because, as Gibson (2009, n.p) argues, “just as turn taking in spoken conversation can be inspected to see how participants negotiate the social organisation of a given event, so written turns within an online conversation can be examined to foreground the interactional work involved in the construction of that particular form of social organization.” In light of the asynchronous nature of the discussion list under study certain leeway had to be given to account for the delay in response to another poster’s contribution, and thus each individual posting to the discussion list was considered a turn (Fitzpatrick & Donnelly, 2010). By treating each thread as its own conversation and each posting as a speaker’s turn, keeping in mind the mediated nature of the interaction between

participants in the discussion list, the methodological principles of discursive ethnomethodology were applied to the analysis of the discussion list.

Edwards and Potter (1992; 1993) argue that language is as an active representation rather than a passive, cognitively bound account and “discursive actions performed in everyday life, as a constitutive part of activity sequences that involve interpersonal or intergroup issues such as blame, responsibility, reward, compliment, invitation, and so on.” (Edwards & Potter, 1993, p. 24). Discursive ethnomethodology focuses on the differing interests at stake in conversation and how participants convey this through their speech, in such a manner that does not weaken or challenge the accounts of the participants (Edwards, & Potter, 1992; 1993; Guerin, 2003). Participants attempt to validate their non-neutral and socially invested talk by using a variety of techniques, such as drawing on or highlighting *category memberships* (making salient a membership to a category entitles the speaker to certain category attributes, while downplaying others) (Edwards & Potter, 1992, Whitehead, 2009). The speaker may use *vivid description* and provide in-depth detail to ensure that their accounts are viewed as accurate; the opposite of this is *systematic vagueness* whereby the speaker only recalls events that will endorse their account or their position (Edwards & Potter, 1992). The use of *narrative* is implemented when the speaker recalls a narrative between others or themselves and others that may confirm or corroborate their account (ibid). Other methods include using *lists and contrasts* in conversation that appear to be representative and precise; as well as describing or creating a *worst case scenario* or situation (ibid). Some speakers use well-constructed arguments (*rhetoric of arguments*) that work to demonstrate logical, factual or *empirical* arguments that distance the speaker from the account but are in fact the speakers’ personal views (ibid).

Another central facet to discourse is accountability - this component highlights the fact that “at the same time as they are reporting and constructing explanations of events, speakers are accountable for their own actions in speaking, for the veracity of their accounts, and for the interactional consequences of those accounts” (Edwards & Potter, 1993; p. 25). This element of discursive ethnomethodology explores and highlights how each speaker is held accountable by others, not only in terms of the event they are reporting, but that they are accountable to others while they are reporting the event (Edwards & Potter, 1992; 1993; Guerin, 2003). Furthermore, as they talk the speaker is also held accountable for their speech and therefore speakers will tend to provide descriptions that are not open to attack and/or

easily refutable, rather, they will seek to provide seemingly solid and valid accounts through their speech. This is achieved through the possible use of euphemisms and/or they will attempt to place blame or the responsibility of accountability on others (ibid). Accounts of events are thus purposive and action oriented, as they can provide empathetic insight or serve to shift blame or accountability from the individual (Abell & Stokoe, 1999).

A further aspect that links to accountability is explanation; Antaki (1996) argues that participants use explanations to account for their actions and in order to progress with the conversation on terms that favour the participant or places the participant in a more socially desirable position.

Questions that were asked using these components were:

- What did the participant say?
- How did the participant phrase their speech?
- What did the manner in which the participants phrase their talk achieve?
- How else could the participant have phrased their talk?
- How does the participants' speech position them (favourably, unfavourably, neutrally, or, objectively)? And why would they seek this position? What do they gain or lose by being seen in this position?

The novel feature of the current study was that it was conducted on conversations carried out over the internet and mediated by a device for communication. This posed many methodological challenges which had to be addressed through the application of theory which had been developed with the nature of online discourse in mind. The largest implication of this was the fact that the nature of the medium of communication had to be kept in mind whilst applying the principles of discursive ethnomethodology.

### **3.6. Codes**

The threads were coded by first identifying descriptive codes; these were then developed into pattern codes that relate to the tree (central) code of discursive repression (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The developing questions and themes were then further explored using discursive ethnomethodology.

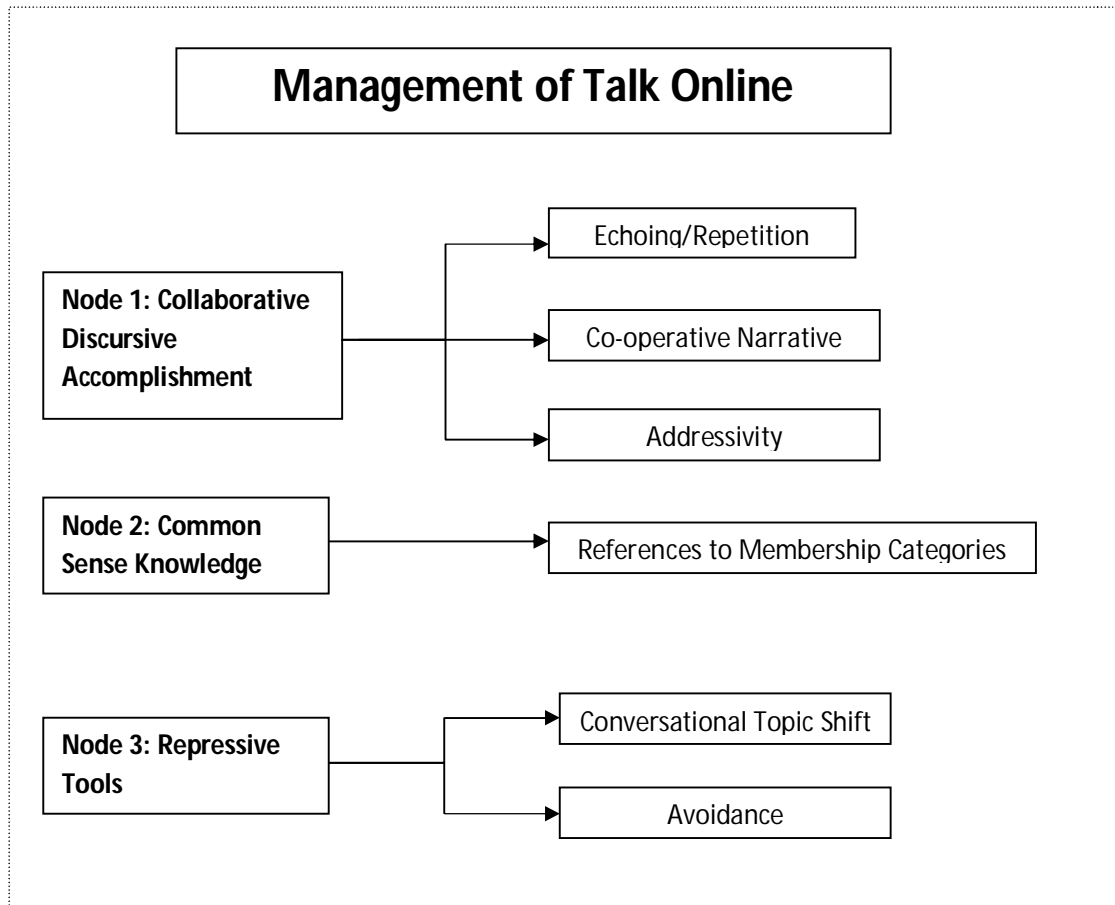


Figure 1.2: Illustration of the Coding Schema

There were three over-arching pattern codes derived from theory, which related to the central code of discursive repression. The first of these was the demonstration of the collaborative discursive accomplishment of talk online. As talk is socially located and is itself an activity it was crucial to demonstrate just how this is done in an online space devoid of non-verbal visual and auditory cues. In order to achieve collaboration of shared patterns of talk and meaning making participants in conversation make use of techniques such as echoing/repetition, co-operative narratives and addressivity (Herring, 2001, Condor, 2006). The use of echoing and repetition allows speakers to create inter-subjective meaning amongst one another, constructing the conversational world and allowing conversational participants to demonstrate that they understand one another (Edwards, 2004; Gordon & Luke, in press). This is crucial in communication online, where it is much easier to be misunderstood. Co-operative narrative, on the other hand, describes the technique which participants in a conversation use to mitigate the impact of a fellow speaker's utterance (Billig, 1998). For example, if a speaker says something that may be perceived as prejudiced in-group members

participating in the interaction may work to mitigate what has been said by providing a rationale for the speakers' utterance (ibid). Addressivity, on the other hand, is concerned with the limitations imposed on speakers by the medium. In online communication participants in a conversation often address each other in a formal manner which is unusual in comparison to spoken conversation (Herring, 2001). Thus, the code addressivity captured the ways in which this was used in the online discussion list.

The second pattern code focused on the use of common-sense knowledge by speakers and how this was created online. In order to achieve the collaborative management of talk, it is necessary for participants to share an inter-subjective understanding of meaning (Edwards, 2004). That is, to suppress or repress the expression of race talk the speaker and audience members must be drawn into shared ways of orienting talk, aware that what is being said could be perceived as prejudiced by an out-group (Durrheim, in press). The most explicit demonstration, and one which was observable in the online space, is the mobilization of common-sense knowledge through the use of references to category memberships. As Whitehead (2009) has shown, the mention of category membership can explain another's actions as well as provide a basis for a conversational audience to use the speaker's own category membership to explain the speaker's actions.

The third pattern code was concerned with the specific discursive tools which participants in the conversation used to repress undesirable talk, an important function in the management of talk. Billig's (1999) theory of repression in discourse provided the basis for the development of this pattern code. Billig (1999; 2006) theorised that repression is a part of external social life apparent in the discursive exchanges which occur between social actors. Repression thus becomes evident in conversation when, for example, participants shift conversational topics in order to avoid or shut down talk (ibid). Repression thus serves many social functions, and was another activity which was observable in the management of talk online.

Drawing on the literature the threads were coded with the following descriptive codes, listed here:

1. Echoing/Repetition – This was coded whenever a poster to the discussion list repeated or echoed a term or concept used by a different poster in a prior post.

2. Co-operative narrative – If a poster provided an account or narrative to explain another poster’s actions it was coded under co-operative narrative.
3. Addressivity – This code captured the ways and means which participants in the discussion list addressed one another when replying to particular posts or portions of a post.
4. References to membership categories – This was used to code any mention of a membership category, such as gender or race.
5. Conversational topic shift – This descriptive code accounted for any attempts by a poster to change the current topic of talk, evidenced by such discursive markers as “anyway” or “yes, but” for example.
6. Avoidance – This descriptive code collated any aversion posters would show to a topic of conversation brought up by another poster.

### **3.7. Ethical Issues**

There are three core ethical principles which guide research, these include: autonomy, beneficence, and justice (Frankel & Siang, 1999). Each of these concepts and the implications for the current study shall be described.

The first principle mentioned above, autonomy, requires that research participants are treated with respect as individuals able to exercise free will (ibid). In operational terms this principle is embodied in the process of informed consent, wherein the risks and benefits of the research are disclosed to the subject. Beneficence, on the other hand, involves maximizing the potential benefits for the participants while minimizing potential harm and risks inflicted on the participant as a result of the research. The last principle, justice, attempts to distribute the risks and benefits associated with research fairly, in order to ensure that particular individuals or groups do not experience disproportionate risks while others enjoy the benefits (ibid).

The internet, through the creation of chat-rooms, discussion lists and other forms of online communication forums, affords exceptional opportunities for the researcher to study behaviour within groups of people (Pittenger, 2003). As the internet is still a new location for the collection of data for study certain principles which have guided ethical research, such as confidentiality, have to be considered carefully (ibid). With regards to the first ethical

principle, autonomy, the distinction between public and private domain is an important factor for determining when informed consent is required (Frankel & Siang, 1999). In argument for research conducted online some researchers have maintained that they are exempt from obtaining informed consent for data collected in the public domain, citing other forms of media which are exempt such as television, newspaper and radio. The internet is considered as a part of the public domain, as online discussion forums, newsgroups and listservs are easily accessible by anyone, similarly to newspaper articles and radio interviews (ibid). However, be that as it may, it is still important to ensure that the participants whose data are used in the study are protected as much as possible by ethical principles. This is because participants in a discussion list may have a false sense of privacy and thus reveal more than what they would have in different conditions (ibid). Therefore, to avoid inflicting harm on participants ensuring confidentiality was an important part of the current study. All identifying information was removed from each poster's contribution to the discussion list and unique random codes assigned to each poster. In addition, all data was stored on an encrypted hard-drive to prevent unauthorised access. Initially the name of the discussion list and the institution which hosted it was kept confidential, as a further measure of ensuring anonymity of participants. However, the context in which this particular discussion list is situated informs much of what is said and who participates on the discussion list. The close link between the context and the discussion list is of value to the analysis conducted; by dissociating the list from the context much is lost in terms of reliability and validity of the results.

With respect to the benefits of the proposed research, Pittenger (2003) argues that research on the internet can add to the growing pool of knowledge on the relatively novel phenomenon of online interaction. In regard to the last ethical principle mentioned earlier, justice, as all postings to the discussion list were included in the sample for study the risks and benefits of the research were evenly distributed amongst all participants who contributed to the discussion list.



## **4. Analysis & Discussion**

The literature thus far has argued that the internet is a discursive phenomenon, lending itself to the study of social practices enacted within talk (Stanley, 2003). The expression of racial stereotypes and racial categorisation in talk is one such social practice which social scientists have studied prolifically over time, and which in discursive social psychology is viewed as situated within the context of interaction and is activity-related, that is to say, the expression of race talk (such as racial stereotyping) performs a specific social function (Condor, 2006; Potter & Edwards, 2001). Studying this talk in interaction has typically proved a difficult task as access to naturally occurring data is hard to obtain, however, in the discussion list there is an opportunity to observe the discursive management of talk unfolding naturally in a specific social context over time.

The following analysis seeks to show how race talk is occasioned in conversation to perform a discursive social action within the context of an e-mail discussion list. Billig (2006, p. 19) theorises: “under certain circumstances it is possible to claim that the processes of thinking can be directly observed. In the to-and-fro of conversation, people are engaged in the activity of thinking, as they formulate and react to novel utterances”. If this is so, then it is possible to understand the means by which racial talk is occasioned, or repressed, in online interactions as people engage with one another in a public context. This analysis takes the form of two sections; the first illustrates how racial talk is occasioned in an online discussion list, and just how participants use inter-subjective meaning and common-sense knowledge to orient themselves to this talk. This section also demonstrates how the creation of inter-subjective meaning lends itself to avoidance and discursive repression of race talk. The second section examines how participants in the discussion list manage perceived problematic talk, in a collaborative manner. Given that race is the implicit, omnipresent “elephant” in most conversations conducted on the list, the means by which participants discursively handle talk where race is made explicit is of some interest.

### **4.1. The Management of Discourse as a Collaborative Effort Online**

Common sense knowledge, or inter-subjective meaning, is arguably the grease which allows the axles of discursive interaction to turn. Common sense knowledge is defined by Garfinkel

(1967, p. 77, in Durrheim, Mtose & Brown, 2011, p. 175) as “the socially-sanctioned-facts-of-life-in-society-that-any-bona-fide-member-of-the-society-knows.” These include expressions of speech, politeness and how to respond to questions for example (ibid). By drawing on common sense knowledge to make sense of the current discourse participants in discursive exchanges can orient themselves to the context at hand, to the speaker, to the conversational topic and so on (Edwards, 2004). Thus a participant’s role in a discursive exchange is often determined by their ability to acknowledge and respond to the creation of inter-subjective meaning within discourse, without this conversation between different participants would fall apart (ibid.). This section of the analysis seeks to show how common sense knowledge plays a part in talk online, firstly by illustrating how inter-subjective meaning is created amongst conversational participants in an online context, where one’s utterances could easily be misconstrued due to the lack of other cues, time delays and so on. Secondly, echoing, repetition and addressivity are highlighted as an essential communicative tool in textual discourse online, as more work needs to be conducted by participants in order to establish discursive relevance and connection with previous utterances on the discussion list. Race talk in this context, such as racial stereotypes, may be occasioned to enable the construction of inter-subjective meaning; however this is at stake in conversation conducted on the discussion list given the context in which the e-mail list is situated.

The following extract illustrates how participants in the discussion list make use of common sense knowledge to demonstrate inter-subjective understanding. Doing so allows conversational participants to orient their talk so as to seem non-prejudiced whilst monitoring the interaction to repress any talk which could be perceived as prejudiced and for which they could be held accountable. The thread was started in response to student protests taking place on the campus of the university, where reports of violent acts by protesters were submitted to the mailing list for discussion by members of the list.

Extract one

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 4

Poster Code: 197

Date: 2009

1. If I call the protesters a bunch of savages will I be protected by academic
2. freedom?
3. If they have a legitimate protest then they have a duty to let us know what it
4. is about. The violence directed at those in no position to help them is
5. sickening and indicative of a larger malaise in the protest culture so evident

6. in South Africa. They are eroding their support base by attacking fellow  
7. students and staff that may give a shit. I do admit that with their behavior I  
8. am all for excluding them for life. Maybe a protest should start with a  
9. statement of  
10. 1) what is the issue?  
11. 2) what is their expected outcome?  
12. 3) What is the time frame for results?  
13. 4) Give a chance for follow up and redress  
14. 5) etc  
15. As opposed to lets trash the joint and go from there. By the time we find out  
16. what they want we won't care.

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 5

Poster Code: 27

Date: 2009

1. Last week I suggested, in jest, that someone could use a pseudonym and write  
2. some much needed satire on Change. However, I actually feel that it  
3. is not a good idea if people post their opinion on a range of issues using a  
4. pseudonym.  
5. We should assert our right to freedom of speech, and own our ideas as much as  
6. is possible. I realize that some people don't feel free to express their  
7. views. And yet, I think it's not good for the exchange of ideas on Change  
8. if we don't state who we are. I'd be interested to know what others  
9. think.

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 6

Poster Code: 197

Date: 2009

1. Well my last post would probably get me assaulted and accused of all sorts so  
2. I am all for a nom-de-plume.

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 7

Poster Code: 26

Date: 2009

1. It's tricky. In cases where freedom of speech is respected, there's less  
2. obvious reason (although by no means none) for writing behind some sort of  
3. screen. There appear to be a range of views about how free people at  
4. UKZN are to express their views about the institution without  
5. fear of unpleasant consequences. I'm not surprised that some might opt for  
6. anonymity. I prefer writing as myself - I find it concentrates the mind  
7. somewhat. And I don't see that this forum could function in a situation where  
8. the majority of posters were of unknown identity.  
9. And it's certainly depressing that when some of us think that the situation  
10. calls for satire, we pretty much assume that the satirist would operate under  
11. a pseudonym.

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 8

Poster Code: 82

Date: 2009

1. [Poster 27],  
2. Given the fact that emails to Change have in the past been used as  
3. "evidence" in Disciplinary Proceedings, I think it's perfectly understandable  
4. why there are pseudonyms popping up.

In the extract above the author of post 4 (lines 1-2) refers to the protesters as “savages”. The choice the term “savages” to describe a membership category (in this case protesting students) is potentially problematic within the context of the discussion list, alluded to when the poster who uses the term queries whether they would be protected by academic freedom (post 4, lines 1-2). Further evidence which shows the problematic nature of post 4 is the avoidance displayed by the first three respondents to the author of post 4. The responding posters orient their talk carefully around post 4, the author of post 5 focuses on the fact that the previous poster is anonymous: “I actually feel that it is not a good idea if people post their opinion on a range of issues using a pseudonym” (post 5, lines 2-3). Through stating their disapproval the author of post 5 attempts to distance themselves from the statements of the anonymous poster, while at the same time managing issues of their own accountability for the anonymous post. The use of the disclaimer “in jest” in the lines: “Last week I suggested, in jest, that someone could use a pseudonym and write some much needed satire on Change. However, I actually feel that it is not a good idea if people post their opinion on a range of issues using a pseudonym.” (post 5, lines 1-4), displays the fact that the author is aware that they might be held accountable for the problematic post. The author uses the disclaimer to shift accountability away from them, pre-empting any implications that they are involved in the posting of the problematic discourse. This immediate attempt by poster 27 to distance themselves from poster 197 shows that post 4 could be perceived as problematic discourse by the audience. The authors of posts 7 and 8 continue to avoid raising the issue of the term by orienting their responses to the anonymous identity of the author of post 4 (post 7 lines 6-8, post 8 lines 2-4). Posters 26, 27 and 82 avoid raising the issue of why post 4 is problematic, going so far as to provide a rationale as to why a person may wish to contribute to the discussion list anonymously (post 7 lines 3-5, post 8 lines 2-4).

In this delicate to-and-fro we see how respondents work together to avoid addressing a potentially problematic utterance explicitly, the use of the term “savages” is the “elephant in the room” in the exchange as the respondents choose to make the anonymity of the speaker the salient topic of conversation. Of particular interest is the politeness which characterizes this exchange. The respondents to post 4 dance around the unsaid topic of the problematic word and by maintaining the social norm of politeness the conversational participants are able to preserve the consistency of their exchange (Grice, 1975). To breach this politeness is to open oneself up to calls for accountability for doing so. This also begs the question of why

the members of the list would respond so delicately to a poster who may not form part of the in-group (discussion list community).

Although the poster is anonymous the use of the word “savage” and the phrase “academic freedom” (post 4, lines 1-2) allows others in the discussion list to make inferences regarding the author’s own membership category (Whitehead, 2009). The use of the term “academic freedom” as well as the author referring to “us” and “we” (post 4, lines 3, 15 and 16) establishes the impression that the poster is a legitimate part of the in-group community which subscribes regularly to the mailing list. This is evident by the justifications and rationale given by other members of the discussion list as to why author of post 4 would contribute to the discussion list anonymously. We begin to see, then, that members of the discussion list are actively engaged in what Billig (1998, p. 206) calls the “joint activity of avoidance”, as participants in the conversation gesture towards the problematic utterance but avoid bringing it up explicitly. In order to achieve this joint avoidance, members of the discussion list use common-sense knowledge elicited by the term “savages” to orient themselves towards the statement and react accordingly.

In this extract we also see the effect of the medium of communication on the conversation. The most noticeable factor is the anonymity which the online space provides for poster 197 who uses a pseudonym when contributing their problematic post to the discussion list. This is significant as this is an academic discussion list in which the majority of users make use of their university e-mail account and are thus highly visible and accountable for their posts. By masking their identity poster 197 is able to articulate an expression which could have potentially led to negative consequences if they had used their real name, as evidenced in post 8 (lines 2-3) where the poster acknowledges the fact that postings to the Change mailing list have been used in disciplinary enquiries. The use of a pseudonym is consequently an acknowledgement of the potential surveillance which the Change list may be under by university management.

In extract 2 more participants of the discussion list join the conversation illustrated in extract 1, as the problematic term used in post 4 drew attention from other members of the community. This extract serves to show how conversation online is kept on track through the use of inter-subjective knowledge and repressive techniques, in the form of avoidance, as

well as illustrating the importance of addressivity in maintaining the logic of turn-taking and conversational relevancy.

Extract 2

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 9

Poster Code: 30

Date: 2009

1. And yet, I think that if we are in fact accountable for what we say, we will
2. be much more likely to evaluate whether it is important, helpful and worthy of
3. debate, or if it is insulting and inflammatory.
4. [Poster 197], I think that your comment about students as 'savages' is
5. indefensible, even if it may be your 'right' to express it. I can think of
6. many reasons to avoid such statements other than fear of assault or
7. disciplinary action against you.

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 10

Poster Code: 168

Date: 2009

1. Thank you [Poster 30] for this response to [Poster 197]. I absolutely support an
2. argument against pseudonyms if it reduces the probability of the change
3. list being used as a vehicle for self protection from such indefensible
4. prejudicial idiocy of such comments as those made by [Poster 197]. Change
5. has been established to provide a forum for debate borne out of a
6. motivation for responsible participation for a just institution and society.
7. Could we please respect it as such and not use it as a platform for bigotry and
8. prejudice rooted in historical oppression under the fallacious guise of the
9. 'right to' freedom of speech.

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 11

Poster Code: 199

Date: 2009

[...]

12. [Poster 197], you provide some useful pointers to protest strategy. Which were
13. lost on people (and would be so on the students) as a result of your opening
14. line. Perhaps you were on the receiving end of or witnessed people/property
15. being damaged etc. and your reaction stemmed from that. Like you I don't want
16. to see SA going down the twin slippery slopes of oppressive unaccountable
17. government and reactionary destructive responses. But when conflicts erupt we
18. especially need to keep our cool, to think before reacting, etc. That's also
19. when the relationships we've established with others provide a foundation (or
20. reveal the lack thereof) for being able to respond constructively.

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 12

Poster Code: 27

Date: 2009

[...]

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 13

Poster Code: 4

Date: 2009

1. [Poster 199] raises a very valid point. I've long believed that EVERY student
2. should have to pass a module at first year level that would include topics such
3. as 'Rights and Obligations of the SA Citizen', 'Conflict
4. Management/Institutionalisation' and Ethics. Perhaps the module should be
5. obligatory for Management as well :-)
6. Best
7. [Poster 4]

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 14

Poster Code: 24

Date: 2009

1. I do wonder whether referring to a word, 'savages' (plus some other choice
2. phrases) to conclude that this is '..indefensible...' and '... a platform for
3. bigotry and prejudice rooted in historical oppression under the fallacious
4. guise of the 'right to' freedom of speech', isn't jumping to conclusions and
5. making a lot of assumptions about an author's intent and premises. Such
6. responses can inadvertently be a form of censorship by castigation -that only
7. polite, non-contentious, nice language is allowed. Its the sort of response
8. that is the despair of satirists - ok, also sometimes knowingly sought and
9. expected.

[...]

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 15

Poster Code: 197

Date: 2009

1. Admittedly some of my words were not great due to a historical usage of a
2. certain word. My words were born out of frustration at violence and threats of
3. violence as a means of protest in the first instance and in no way refer to any
4. population group so assumed.

[...]

23. And I will use a nom de plume due to violence and the threat of disciplinary
24. action.

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 16

Poster Code: 168

Date: 2009

1. ja, ja...and in a perfect world where all people are free and equal (which we
2. know this world of ours is not) all words can have equal weight. I don't
3. think we should muffle censure of oppression through over-determining
4. political correctness (which is after all concerning power (im)balances). Open
5. debate on terminology, and issues like race and racism should not, in the name
6. of freedom of expression, become an unwitting platform for condonation of
7. racist proclamations and practices - which by definition are 'silencing'
8. oppressive mechanisms. In this case, the word 'savage' is a racially loaded
9. term in our context. When used in reference to black students it is racist -
10. pure and simple. If my response silences racism - frankly that is a good
11. thing. ...and yet...the point is taken in regard to the untamed words used
12. in critical response...but too much taming...?

Thread Number: 777

Post Number: 17

Poster Code: 198

Date: 2009

1. [Poster 168] and others,

2. I won't defend the use of the term - savage, but I will not condemn it either.  
3. One may agree that the term 'savage' is historically loaded in the African  
4. context, but is not the responses to its use also historically loaded? ie -  
5. the assumption being made is that the students were indeed 'black'? And that  
6. the author meant the term in such a manner? Indeed no reference was made to  
7. the race of the students, just their behaviour.  
8. In fact I read (maybe even misread) the statement as tongue in cheek about the  
9. protests and issues of academic freedom rolled into a simple, cheeky question.  
10. What it drew my attention to (even if unwittingly) was that the protesters  
11. were largely comprised of 'black' students thus raising questions of real  
12. race issues of access and equality at UKZN. And makes us  
13. wonder to what extent does academic freedom go? Should we not have open  
14. discussions about topics that make us uncomfortable? Make us angry?  
[...]

In extract 2 the tug of war for control of the discursive platform between participants of the discussion list is most evident. More importantly, we see how members of the discussion list use repetition to create inter-subjective meaning amongst one another and in doing so mitigate any accusations of prejudice directed at the author who used the word “savages” in extract 1 (post 4, lines 1-2). The author of post 9 is the first to explicitly express a problem with the reference to protesters as savages, arguing that the comment is ‘indefensible’ (post 9, lines 4-5). The very next poster echoes the condemnation of the problematic post as well as making explicit that the term may be understood as “prejudicial” given the “historical oppression” of the society in which the discussion is situated (post 10, lines 3-8). The repetition of the word “indefensible” in post 10 is of particular interest, as this repetition or ‘echoing’ allows the author of post 10 to show the author of post 9 that they understand one another and share the same sentiments (Gordon & Luke, 2011). Echoing is also a means by which conversational a participant ensures their contribution to the conversation is relevant and polite, as well as means by which the conversation is kept on course (Edwards, 2004). This is of special importance when conducting talk online, as the use of quoting in the text is a key technique which maintains relevancy and establishes links between posts which have come before and the current post (Gruber, 1998).

This interaction effectively wrests control of the discursive platform from the original author of the “savages” post as evidenced by the silence displayed by the author of the problematic post and in fact poster 197 does not re-enter the conversation until in response to the explicit condemnation of the discourse in posts 9 and 10, the author of post 11 provides an emotive rationale for the use of the phrase: “Perhaps you were on the receiving end of or witnessed people/property being damaged etc. and your reaction stemmed from that” (post 11, lines 14-



15). This rationalising is echoed further on in the exchange as the author of post 14 continues to dismiss the condemnation of the problematic talk by arguing that the condemnation is “jumping to conclusions and making a lot of assumptions about an author’s intent and premises” (post 14, lines 1-5). This is continued by the author of post 17 (lines 1-7) who dismisses any arguments that the problematic statement is prejudiced by arguing that the statement did not explicitly reference a racial membership category and, in fact, those members of the audience who inferred that the term ‘savage’ is prejudiced are themselves prejudiced. This is implicit in the lines “One may agree that the term 'savage' is historically loaded in the African context, but is not the responses to its use also historically loaded? i.e. - the assumption being made is that the students were indeed 'black'? And that the author meant the term in such a manner? Indeed no reference was made to the race of the students, just their behavior” (post 17, lines 3-7). Whitehead (2009) has shown that a speaker’s mobilization of common sense racial knowledge through the use of a racial category to explain another’s actions can provide a justified basis for the audience to use the speaker’s own racial membership category in explaining that speaker’s actions. Thus the author of post 17 argues that those dissenting contributors who raised an issue with the word ‘savage’ are perhaps themselves doing so from a racially motivated position (ibid). This effectively shifts accountability away from the author of the problematic posting (as well as those who entered the conversation to defend the authors’ use of the phrase) and towards those who condemned the problematic phrase as prejudiced. This behaviour has been documented before, as van Dijk (1992, p. 90) argues that “accusations of racism, then, soon tend to be seen as more serious social infractions than racist attitudes or actions themselves, e.g. because they disrupt in-group solidarity and smooth in-group encounters”. This is corroborated by Durrheim (in press) who has shown that racial stereotypes may be gestured towards implicitly in conversation through the use of common-sense knowledge, leaving it up to the audience to do the work of ‘hearing’ the stereotype. In this way the speaker can always deny the presence of the stereotype and the accountability for expressing prejudice then falls on the hearer (ibid). This provides another rationale as to why members of the discussion list at first avoided accusing the author who used the problematic phrase of prejudice, and those who did not do so quickly found themselves having to defend their accusations in the face of counter-accusations that they themselves were acting from a prejudiced point of view.

The author who used the term “savages” seizes on the opportunity to re-enter the discussion, by acknowledging that the original post could be perceived incorrectly and agreeing with the

rationale provided by other posters for the use of the problematic phrase: “My words were born out of frustration at violence and threats of violence as a means of protest in the first instance and in no way refer to any population group so assumed” (post 15, lines 1-4). This line echoes earlier posts about the author’s intentions for using the word ‘savages’. Used in such a way one may begin to see how echoing is not merely repetition, but that it may be implicit in a conversational participant’s response and performs a specific action in the discourse, in this case mitigating accountability for the expression of a problematic word. Furthermore, it can be seen that participants in the discussion have collaboratively created a discursive space for the author of the problematic post to provide an explanation for their actions, as well as an opportunity to deny any racial basis for the use of the phrase ‘savages’. In their seminal work researching the processes of the denial of prejudice Billig (1988) and van Dijk (1992) show how participants in a discursive exchange make use of disclaimers, as the author of the “savages” phrase does, in order to mitigate any accusations of prejudice. By focusing on the violence of the protesters the author and those in agreement with the author are able to justify the phrase as a descriptive category, albeit contentiously, of the protesters’ actions and not a membership category implicit of racial prejudice as some of the discussion list participants contested it to be.

Besides the social activity occurring in extract 2 as different conversational participants vie for the discursive floor, we may observe a method which participants in the conversation make use of to maintain talk in an online space. Authors of the postings in extract 2 often explicitly address another author in their own contribution, as in post 9 (line 4) and post 10 (line 1) in which the authors name the other poster to whom they are directing their response. This ‘addressivity’ as Herring (2001) names it, does the work of maintaining the logic of turn-taking within the context of a conversation which is asynchronous, that is, contributions to the list may be sent and received out of the order in which they were intended by the authors. This prevents misunderstandings and allows the conversation to flow as intersubjective understanding is constructed between conversational participants. Furthermore, in post 14 (as an example) the author makes use of quoting. This creates the illusion of conversational turn adjacency (ibid) and does much work in establishing connection and relevancy to the post it is directed. Quoting also performs a rhetorical function, as it is hard for a conversational participant to counter an argument or account which makes use of directly reported speech, reproduced verbatim. This is one of the unique idiosyncrasies which

computer mediated communication affords conversational participants when discursive exchanges take place.

The previous extracts illustrated how talk in which racial categorisation is occasioned is repressed collaboratively as in-group members do much work to firstly avoid a problematic topic and secondly, mitigate or provide a rationale for the perceived prejudiced talk of another in-group member whilst dismissing any challenges that the discourse is prejudiced (Billig, 1998). This could not be achieved without the creation of inter-subjective meaning (through echoing, repetition and addressivity) between participants and the following extract illustrates another example where repetition and amplification (Condor et al., 2006) are used to build up an inter-subjective understanding between participants in the discussion list. The thread centres on later student protests which had taken place at the University.

### Extract three

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 1

Poster Code: 141

Date: 2011

1. Am I the only one finding it problematic that some students' way of raising an
2. issue with the institution is through interrupting lectures and in some cases
3. resorting to violence?

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 2

Poster Code: 6

Date: 2011

1. NO - there must be a better approach than damaging property and not attending
2. classes

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 3

Poster Code: 120

Date: 2011

1. I agree - also saddened after talking to 2 of the contract cleaning staff on
2. [Name removed] concourse this morning, who have to clean up after every single
3. rubbish bin had been overturned along the concourse and they said they could
4. not even clean the toilets because a large group of students just went back in
5. and trashed the place again (leaving taps running and pulling toilet paper all
6. over the place). These 2 woman have the right to do their job and said they
7. were confused.

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 4

Poster Code: 105

Date: 2011

1. i think the issue here is lack of solidarity across and intra-groups.
2. When cleaners and support staff go on strike they do it alone, when
3. academics decide (if they wake up to realise they need to) the students do not
4. join, and when students go on strike, not all of them do - and other sectors

5. of the community remain un-interested.  
[...]

Thread Number: 965  
Post Number: 5  
Poster Code: 141  
Date: 2011

1. Allow me to differ.
- 2.(1) A decent system allows for peaceful protest. If the students had exhausted
3. the peaceful means of raising their issues, one can start to argue that they
4. had no other choice to get heard. But they hadn't. They didn't announce the
5. protest, etc.
- 6.(2) Is any issue reasonable enough to push into violent conflict? Violent
7. conflict may be necessary in an oppressive system, but if venues are provided
8. for peaceful protest, are we going to simply let it slide? The message then
9. clearly is that it pays off to go directly to violent conflict rather than
10. raise the issue in peaceful ways - it won't even have consequences to those
11. who trash property and assault others!
- 12.(3) If the 'protest' is targeting individuals, we have a serious problem.
13. There are enough means to challenge an office bearer; one does not have to
14. burn the person's car or make threats to his life!

Thread Number: 965  
Post Number: 6  
Poster Code: 46  
Date: 2011

1. And dumping trash all over that the cleaning staff will have to pick up. Very
2. inconsiderate. I think the students should be required to do it, but it won't
3. happen.

Thread Number: 965  
Post Number: 7  
Poster Code: 47  
Date: 2011

1. The sad thing is that certain staff members of this institution also believe
2. that issues can only be resolved with threats and damage to property!

Thread Number: 965  
Post Number: 8  
Poster Code: 13  
Date: 2011  
[...]

Thread Number: 965  
Post Number: 9  
Poster Code: 196  
Date: 2011

1. In my view there is no anything justifying violence except, and then maybe,
2. being the victim of violence of any form.
3. "From what I observed the group of students, On Monday (on the 28th of
4. February) attacked and threw around furniture, chairs, tables, tableware, in
5. the coffee shop at the [Name removed]."
6. To this day it would be rather interesting to know what it is they have a
7. grievance about.
8. In terms of those who are interested in either tactics or strategy it would be
9. a good idea not to threaten any member of groups who may potentially be
10. allied.
11. The distasteful idea of forcing the cleaning staff to clean up the mess is a

12. sad reminder of who is oppressed.  
[...]

Thread Number: 965  
Post Number: 10  
Poster Code: 105  
Date: 2011  
[...]

12. I would advocate for clearly articulates causes of actions and desired  
13. outcomes and would not condemn those incensed by felt injustice and  
14. oppression, when they get a bit excited ..

Thread Number: 965  
Post Number: 11  
Poster Code: 141  
Date: 2011

1. Landing someone in hospital and burning their car counts as 'a bit excited'?  
2. THAT's got me worried!

Thread Number: 965  
Post Number: 12  
Poster Code: 105  
Date: 2011

1. Hi  
2. I have to acknowledge that i am not in touch with the specific facts on  
3. the ground. What I was writing about is the general dismissal of violence as  
4. a means to an end in a society defined by violence and oppression itself is  
5. also a form of violence. Where a war has been declared and everyone  
6. understands it to have been and to be in a war zone, casualties can only  
7. be regretted. In this situation, where actions focus on specific  
8. individuals rather than a system and its representation, the information as to  
9. why that was the case is not provided in the posts on the issue.

Thread Number: 965  
Post Number: 13  
Poster Code: 196  
Date: 2011

1. A few facts on the ground may be helpful  
2. 1. There are several instances of damages done to property and to individuals  
3. 2. To my knowledge, and I would be glad to stand corrected, Src said nothing  
4. about the complaints and the demands  
5. 3. One thing is clear: cleaning staff are victims at the very least of being  
6. forced to extra work  
7. 4. The sophisms entail by "dismissing violence as a means etc." are  
8. irrelevant.  
9. 5. We may want to read the Rivonia trial transcripts.

[...]  
28. I surmise that the oppression experienced by Ukzn students is of somewhat  
29. different nature w.r.t. the oppression experienced by virtually all non White  
30. groups in the old South Africa. I submit to you that even then the recourse to  
31. violence was the last & not the first "means to an end."  
[...]

Thread Number: 965  
Post Number: 14  
Poster Code: 166  
Date: 2011

1. We've just had a mob of protesting students enter the chemical engineering

2. bldg and disrupt lectures.  
[...]

In extract 3 the contributors echo one another's portrayal of the student protesters as inarticulate as evidenced in post 1 (lines 1-3): "Am I the only one finding it problematic that some students' way of raising an issue with the institution is through interrupting lectures and in some cases resorting to violence?", in post 5 (lines 2-5): "If the students had exhausted the peaceful means of raising their issues, one can start to argue that they had no other choice to get heard. But they hadn't. They didn't announce the protest" and post 9 (lines 6-7): "To this day it would be rather interesting to know what it is they have a grievance about". In these lines of talk we see that posters echo one another, as well as extending the topic of conversation which is being echoed. Edwards (2004) has shown that when repetition occurs in speech amongst conversational participants there is often a need to add more information to the repeated discourse. This repetition and amplification does the work of showing understanding as well as keeping the talk relevant, however, adding too much information may be seen as irrelevant and disrupt the logical flow of the conversation (Grice, 1975). The participants in the exchange also portray the protesters as violent, as seen in post 5 (lines 12-14): "If the 'protest' is targeting individuals, we have a serious problem. There are enough means to challenge an office bearer; one does not have to burn the person's car or make threats to his life!", in post 11 (lines 1-2): "Landing someone in hospital and burning their car counts as 'a bit excited'? THAT's got me worried", and in post 14 (lines 1-2): "We've just had a mob of protesting students enter the chemical engineering bldg and disrupt lectures". The constant uptake and reiteration by the posters of the portrayal of the protesting students as inarticulate and violent serves to create a common understanding among the in-group which serves to silence or cut off dissenting views which attempt to portray the students differently (as in post 10, lines 12-14 and post 12, lines 7-9). This is evident when in response to differing viewpoints poster 196 employs the use of a list (post 13, lines 1-10). This discursive technique which portrays subjective opinions and statements as objective facts is employed to deal with issues of accountability, in this case to deal with accountability for potentially prejudiced talk (Edwards & Potter, 1992). The echoing present in the use of the list thus does rhetorical work, countering any explicit and implicit contrary themes in the discourse. If the speaker is merely repeating facts they cannot be held accountable for perceived prejudiced talk, while at the same time taking control of the discursive floor by dismissing the differing opinion as just that – an opinion with no substantial evidence to back it up. The author draws

on the inter-subjective understanding which has been worked up amongst the in-group contributors of the thread to create the list, portraying the protesters' reported violent actions as fact and summarily dismissing any counter argument as in this example: "The sophisms entail by 'dismissing violence as a means etc.' are irrelevant" (post 13, lines 7-8).

In South Africa the historical use of violent protest has traditionally been employed to resist white minority rule, and consequently, the opposition to 'violent' protest has been carried out by 'white racists' who supported apartheid. Therefore, there is an implicit racial undercurrent which colours the discourse in the context of the history of the university. This is acknowledged by the posters (post 13, lines 28-31), and dismissing the counter argument against the negative portrayal of the protesters out of hand leaves the posters open to questions of accountability regarding prejudice against the protesting students. As in the references to "savages" in extracts 1 and 2 the participants' talk about the protesters flags a specific racial category membership. In order to orient their talk to counter any allegations of prejudice the contributors to the discussion repeat the notion that the protests are victimising cleaning staff (eliciting another reference to a racial category as cleaning staff are largely drawn from the lowest working class, largely comprised of the black population in South Africa) working at the University. Some examples from the text include such phrases as this one from post 3 (lines 1-5): "also saddened after talking to 2 of the contract cleaning staff on [Name removed] concourse this morning, who have to clean up after every single rubbish bin had been overturned along the concourse and they said they could not even clean the toilets because a large group of students just went back in and trashed the place again (leaving taps running and pulling toilet paper all over the place). These 2 woman have the right to do their job and said they were confused". This sentiment is taken up and echoed in post 6 (lines 1-3): "And dumping trash all over that the cleaning staff will have to pick up. Very inconsiderate. I think the students should be required to do it, but it won't happen", post 9 (lines 11-12): "The distasteful idea of forcing the cleaning stuff to clean up the mess is a sad reminder of who is oppressed" and "One thing is clear: cleaning staff are victims at the very least of being forced to extra work" from post 13 (lines 5-6). In these postings one may also observe the process of amplification as each contributor adds their own information to the post in order to keep it relevant.

The repeated references to the cleaning staff as victims of the protest is worked up collaboratively with other contributors to the list, by repeating the plight of the cleaning staff

the contributors are able to show each other (and the audience) that they share an understanding, publicly painting a picture of concern among themselves for the black cleaners and downplaying the implicit racial theme which is present in the conversation. Edwards (2004) has written at length describing the process of the creation of inter-subjective meaning, arguing that inter-subjective understanding is constantly created in talk and text in order to achieve some performative task. In this case, the portrayal of the cleaners as victims does much to show how participants of the discussion list explicitly empathize with the plight of the cleaners. Furthermore, for a conversational participant to show another speaker that they share an understanding the speaker will repeat what has already been said, often providing further information to reinforce the fact that the speakers have successfully constructed inter-subjective meaning among themselves (ibid.). This is clearly illustrated in the talk about the cleaning staff, as participants reiterate their pity for the staff while providing a narrative of their own about the difficulties faced by the cleaning staff. Echoing and repetition, then, can be seen as more of an essential communicative tool in a discussion list than face to face discussion, as more work needs to be done to establish relevance and connection with previous utterances. We can now see that a shared discourse has been constructed which allows participants in the discussion to orient themselves to talk which continues to present the protesting students in a negative light while at the same time preemptively countering possible accusations of prejudice regarding this negative portrayal.

Through the use of common sense knowledge and inter-subjective meaning participants in the discussion list are able to perform various actions with their talk, as evidenced in the examples discussed thus far. In these we can see how participants control the conversational space collaboratively, working together to seize the discursive floor, mitigating problematic talk and jointly avoiding talk around topics which are undesirable to the in-group whilst keeping the conversation on course (Billig, 1998; Condor, 2006). Race talk in this context is occasioned to do specific social activity, as in extract 1 where the explicit utterance of a taboo phrase is employed to push the limits of what is considered polite and acceptable talk on the discussion list. By availing the means afforded by the medium of communication (in this case anonymity) the author is able to make use of the rhetorical properties of the taboo phrase, drawing in the audience to a shared meaning system. This section has also demonstrated how participants make full use of conversational techniques such as repetition, amplification and addressivity to overcome challenges imposed by the medium of communication. Besides doing the work of maintaining logic and flow of conversation these tools also enable



participants in the discussion list to construct shared meanings and representations, as in extract 3. Here participants in a discussion use repetition and echoing to deal with dilemmas of stake in the conversation (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Given the context in which the conversation is occurring participants in the discussion about student protests are aware that their portrayal of the students may be construed by the audience as racially biased, and therefore their accounts may be discounted and undermined by other conversational participants (ibid). Thus constructions of empathy with the self-same racial category as the students, in the form of cleaning staff, are elicited through repetition, echoing and the management of shared knowledge (knowledge that there is a need to rhetorically allay counter-accounts, as well as common sense knowledge of the categorisations used in the talk). By gesturing towards the racial category membership represented by the cleaning staff in conversation the speakers force listeners to apply their common sense knowledge in an effort to hear race as relevant for understanding the conversation, thus making them complicit in constructing racial common sense in this context (Whitehead, 2009). Through this it is demonstrated that the speakers do not need to explicitly articulate the racial category membership they wish to make salient in the conversation and as a result they can mobilise racial category membership to explain the actions of the students while pre-empting any inferences that they themselves are doing so from a racially motivated position (Durrheim, in press, Whitehead, 2009). As noted in the literature, the unspeakable stereotypes are gestured toward by the participants on the discussion list in forms of expression in which they are concurrently revealed and hidden, and thus require a collaborative effort from both speaker and audience to understand the talk at hand (Durrheim, in press)

#### **4.2. Discursive Management of Problematic Race Talk**

This section of analysis attempts to illustrate just how participants of an online asynchronous discussion deal with talk perceived by them to be explicitly problematic. Whereas racial themes in the discourse contained within the previous extracts were implicit, the explicit expression of these themes and the ways in which this is dealt with discursively by the conversational participants online is of some importance. A key concept which underlies the discursive methods participants may employ is that of topic shifting. Billig (1999) argues that to the extent that language allows certain topics in discourse to be explored, so too does it allow other topics to be shut down or avoided. In everyday talk we are able to change the

topic of conversation, pushing talk away from certain topics and towards others, effectively directing talk to the topics we deem fit. However, these processes do not take place in isolation and it is the fact that it occurs with other speakers that makes discursive repression a social activity (ibid.). In order to close down talk which is deemed problematical by conversational participants there exists a system of avoidance and this is achieved through moving conversation away from the problematic topic and towards a more acceptable topic. However, this can only succeed insofar as it is allowed to by the audience of the conversation, as well as the effectiveness of the new topic to garner attention. As Billig (2006, p. 21) notes “speakers, in seeking to direct their auditors’ attention to a particular topic, must use words to point to that topic”, this means that in order to achieve an effective shift in topic speakers must employ words which point towards a new topic, while at the same time not drawing undue attention lest they themselves become the new topic of conversation. In conversation, Billig (1999, 2006) points out, there is too much occurring at once for participants to orientate themselves toward everything that is said. Instead participants selectively orient themselves towards certain aspects of the conversation and ignore others and it is this selective orientation which is of interest.

The extract which follows attempts to illustrate the processes of discursive management of perceived problematic discourse online. The thread from which extract 4, below, originates revolved around a discussion on transformation at the institution. The extract illustrates just how participants in a discussion attempt to close down problematic talk as well as close out a problematic conversational participant from the conversation.

#### Extract 4

Thread Number: 44

Post Number: 8

Poster Code: 41

Date: 2006

[...]

22. You speak like a true democrat and a practitioner of non-racialism. It is  
23. strange that instead of an applause by all previously oppressed people for  
24. your ideals you attract a different reaction. It may be that you have been  
25. well schooled in the liberal tendencies which like to speak for the oppressed  
26. than listen to them. This tendency tends to know all the answers before the  
27. problem has been properly analysed by those who are feeling the brunt of  
28. oppression. Liberals are best spokespersons but unlike the Joe Slovos, Ruth  
29. Wests, Maharaj, Kasrils, etc. who have lived the experience and have  
30. identified with the bigger voices of the masses, liberals do not wish to cross  
31. that line.  
32. I like all your views but they are not rooted in the experience of Africans you  
33. live and work with in PMB. In fact my perception you  
34. represent the direct opposite of what you profess. Your stance against  
35. redressing the past inequities through the merger between UDW

36. and Natal as proposed by our government is a case at hand. You  
37. have taken sides with the privileged and have ignored the plight of the  
38. underprivileged. Thus, you cannot claim to champion our cause. We will  
39. determine the route we wish to take.  
[...]

Thread Number: 44  
Post Number: 9  
Poster Code: 11  
Date: 2006

1. Dear [poster 41]  
2. We are talking about issues that are much bigger than you and me alone, so I  
3. think that it not necessary that we personalize the discussion. This is a  
4. useful discussion to have in the open so we can all perhaps begin to understand  
5. each other a little more to try to make better sense of our reality.  
6. I have chosen to persist with this discussion, because the alternate is what we  
7. have had for too long now \* racial stresses build up within our society over  
8. the course of time, and then these stresses are relieved in a myriad of  
9. damaging ways, only to have us all retreat to our little spaces, often  
10. complaining to ourselves.  
[...]

Thread Number: 44  
Post Number: 10  
Poster Code: 6  
Date: 2006

1. Fair response I think  
2. [poster 6]

Thread Number: 44  
Post Number: 11  
Poster Code: 41  
Date: 2006

[...]  
15. All I hear from you are your plans and your calls. Non-racialism from my  
16. experience in sport is transformative and is active. it is not about lots of  
17. talk but generating a programme of action which is embraced by those who  
18. identify with it and turned into action. This has changed post-independence.  
19. I am not sure what you actually want me to do specifically. I must also  
20. indicate that, though I have had negative experiences here I have also had  
21. many pleasant and good ones. I carry no personal grudges or agendas. I can  
22. afford to be transparent about my views good or bad.  
23. How do you want me to respond to your call in the light of your emails. Are  
24. you the founder of a group or movement? Please clarify. What is its modus  
25. operandi?  
26. Regards  
27. [poster 41]

Thread Number: 44  
Post Number: 12  
Poster Code: 11  
Date: 2006

1. Dear [poster 41]:  
2. I have written to you in my personal capacity. I found it useful to have this  
3. exchange with you. Our correspondence has been routed via the Change list  
4. that has been widely publicised within the institution. By my estimation,  
5. several hundred people have read our correspondence. This facility  
6. does not belong to any particular person or group. It is meant to be a virtual  
7. space that facilitates the exchange of thoughts and ideas about our institution  
8. in a constructive and collegial manner and across all boundaries. Thank you for  
9. writing me back.

Thread Number: 44  
Post Number: 13  
Poster Code: 41  
Date: 2006

[...]  
24. What's my point in this? Whatever your notion on non-racialism, it cannot

25. fly this day in south Africa, if it seeks to only promote elitist and minority  
26. tendencies and not relate to grass-roots ideals. There must be another  
27. agenda, an African agenda, which I know, Afro-pessimists don't like. It has  
28. been the dreams of Kwame Nkruma, Julius Nyerere, Oliver Tambo, and many other  
29. noble leaders died dreaming of. It is embedded in or National Anthem, the  
30. desire to see the emancipation of Africa. Nkosisikelelí Afrika. What ever  
31. lofty ideals we may have cannot supersede this ideal. However, it appears  
32. that anything African gets rejected. There is this constant view that rejects  
33. African views and ideas and seeks to move us out of Egypt into slavery where  
34. only Eurocentric opinions are the only acceptable views. This will not work  
35. what ever your plot is. We want to have African dreams and values back into  
36. this institution you wish to transform.  
37. Next time I will write you and your friends in isiXhosa mfowethu, my father  
38. tongue, or even isiZulu, and articulate my views for an institution of African  
39. scholarship I wish to see.  
40. Do you permit me to share our communicaiton with my colleagues in the African  
41. forum? I am not a subscriber to your group, I don't even know who it serves.  
42. Regards  
43. [poster41]

Thread Number: 44

Post Number: 14

Poster Code: 18

Date: 2006

1. Dear Colleagues

2. So there we have it in glorious technicolour (sorry, black and white).

3. The racism of one era has been exchanged for the racism of another, a

4. development we have for too long been pretending is not happening.

5. Who's willing to fight this as we fought apartheid? Or has everyone gone to

6. sleep?

7. A luta continua

8. [poster 18]

Thread Number: 44

Post Number: 15

Poster Code: 30

Date: 2006

1. Colleagues,

2. I am worried that this conversation has become a series of glib pronouncements

3. and polarized statements from entrenching 'camps'. I suggest we discontinue in

4. this forum as it is clear we need to begin seriously to acknowledge the various

5. strands of pain and concern at work here.

6. Surely it would be astonishing if conflicts did not surround discussions of the

7. future, given the complexity of this society's past. We can neither afford to

8. forget the complexity of that history (and its legacies), nor lose sight about

9. what has been gained, including the space to have real dialogue. Cannot we

10. benefit from stepping back and theorizing, historicizing, applying the benefits

11. of working at a institution of knowledge production to these conflicts--and

12. find common ground through that process?

13. [poster 30]

Thread Number: 44

Post Number: 16

Poster Code: 6

Date: 2006

1. Agreed

2. [poster6]

Thread Number: 44

Post Number: 17

Poster Code: 41

Date: 2006

1. Dear [poster 11]

2. I have been employed here to teach, conduct research, do outreach and contribute

3. to managing my faculty. My time for this debate is over now. I have nothing

4. more to write you contrary to my earlier indication. Please tell your

5. colleagues and yourself not to write me any more. Its a waste of my precious

6. time. Continue your discussions among yourselves.

7. Regards
8. [poster41]

Thread Number: 44

Post Number: 18

Poster Code: 40

Date: 2006

1. I don't agree that we should stop talking.
  2. I'm still trying to make sense of what's going on in this grumpy exchange. I
  3. don't see things as clearly as either [poster 41] or [poster 18]. I don't see
  4. transformation-resisting plots where [poster 41] does and I don't see evidence
  5. of racism where [poster 18] does. But it strikes me that we ought at least to
  6. try, for the sake of all our futures, to continue to talk and to try to
  7. interpret one another's comments in these exchanges with charity and humanity.
  8. I don't see [poster 41]'s latest mail as providing evidence of racism and I
  9. don't see [poster 11] agenda as being one designed especially to resist
  10. transformation.
- [...]

Thread Number: 44

Post Number: 19

Poster Code: 39

Date: 2006

1. Indeed, rhetoric of recent communications brings back uneasy memories of not so
  2. recent past in Europe, China and few other places: cultural revolution,
  3. reeducation camps, a few other unpleasant things. Let us hope that there is
  4. still a common space about which we can still sit down and talk.
- [...]

Thread Number: 44

Post Number: 20

Poster Code: 26

Date: 2006

1. Colleagues,
  2. I don't think we should stop, even though what this forum produces is indeed
  3. neither edifying nor entertaining much of the time. For all that I do not
  4. discern genuine ill-will here, and mistrust and incomprehension are better
  5. combatted through engagement (interspersed with reflection) than isolation.
- [...]

Thread Number: 44

Post Number: 21

Poster Code: 4

Date: 2006

1. It seems to me that there is too much mistrust to continue any debate between
2. this group and the [Name removed] via e-mail about what the nature of a non-
3. racist institution should be. If the executive has any sense it will realise
4. what a serious situation is developing and will provide the resources to
5. facilitate a continuation of the debate under more conducive conditions. I
6. wonder if we could obtain clarity about the sweeping statement that all of the
7. Unions are supporting the [Name removed] proposals - is this really true?

Extract 4 provides an example of how participants in a discursive exchange make attempts to manage the topic of talk at hand. Poster 41, in their contributions to the discussion in posts 8 and 13 repeatedly raises the issue of race when they categorise poster 11 as a “liberal” and “privileged”, in their words, one who espouses the practice of non-racialism but who in fact “represents the direct opposite of what you profess (post 8, lines 33-34). The author also accuses poster 11 of being an opponent of transformation at the institution: “Your stance against redressing the past inequities through the merger between UDW and Natal as

proposed by our government is a case at hand” (post 8, lines 34-36). By making use of such membership categories as “liberal”, “privileged” and “Afro-pessimists” poster 41 is able to draw on common-sense knowledge of these membership categories to mobilise racial themes in the conversation. The author also draws on common-sense knowledge that anyone “anti-transformative” is racist. The fact that alluding to racial prejudice is undesirable in this context is seen through the immediate response which attempts to shut down any further talk on the subject of racial prejudice. The first evidence of this is in post 12 (lines 3-5): “Our correspondence has been routed via the Change list that has been widely publicised within the institution. By my estimation, several hundred people have read our correspondence.” By making the public nature of the discussion salient poster 11 alerts poster 41 to the fact that they may be held accountable for their earlier and subsequent comments, by “several hundred people.” By making the audience relevant in the conversation poster 11 attempts to rhetorically undermine any further talk on race, effectively closing down the conversation as it stands.

Furthermore, the implicit racial theme which has been the undercurrent of the exchange up until post 14 is made explicit in when poster 18 evokes the phrase: “So there we have it in glorious technicolour (sorry, black and white). The racism of one era has been exchanged for the racism of another” (post 14, lines 2-3). In this phrase the argument for transformation in South Africa evoked by poster 41 is constructed by poster 18 as new black-on-white racism (as opposed to the ‘traditional’ forms of racial prejudice implied by poster 41). Although not explicitly directed at any one participant in the discussion the author uses humour to invoke racial category memberships, as well as raising the topic of racism. Billig (2001, p. 268) notes that humour is “a socially accepted means of breaking taboos” and so the author of post 14 is able to make racial category memberships explicit while at the same time downplaying the extent to which they can be held accountable for doing so. The second attempt to shut down the conversation occurs immediately after the racial theme is articulated, by an in-group discussion list participant, in post 15: “I am worried that this conversation has become a series of glib pronouncements and polarized statements from entrenching 'camps'. I suggest we discontinue in this forum [...]” (lines 2-4) and the agreement in the post which follows (post 16). However, as no new topic is presented to which further talk can be oriented the discursive exchange continues as evidenced in post 18 (lines 1-5): “I don't agree that we should stop talking I'm still trying to make sense of what's going on in this grumpy exchange [...] I don't see transformation-resisting plots where [*poster 41*] does and I don't see evidence

of racism where [poster 18] does.” This is echoed a little further on in the discussion in post 20 (lines 1-3): “Colleagues, I don’t think we should stop, even though what this forum produces is indeed neither edifying nor entertaining much of the time.” These posts show that further talk on the topic has not been closed, as no new topic of conversation was presented with which to replace the former topic, and attempt to re-open the discussion. These attempts to keep the discussion open may be seen as repressive in themselves, as abrupt discontinuation of the discussion could be assumed by the audience to be based on racial grounds following the explicit expression of race talk in post 14. Instead the attempts to keep the discussion going, by providing mitigating narratives downplaying the extent to which race is salient in the conversation, display management of shared knowledge as the posters collaborate to manage accountability of the in-group for discourse which may be perceived by an audience as racially biased.

The attempts to keep the conversation open are followed quickly by another post which reiterates the closure of the conversation: “It seems to me that there is too much mistrust to continue any debate between this group and the [Name removed] via e-mail about what the nature of a non-racist institution should be” (post 21, lines 1-3). The poster ends their contribution with a question: “I wonder if we could obtain clarity about the sweeping statement that all of the Unions are supporting the [Name removed] proposals - is this really true?” (post 21, lines 5 -7), in an attempt to move the conversation away from the problematic topic and towards a new, safer topic of conversation.

In the interplay between these participants in the discussion list it is apparent that explicit talk of race is a contentious topic, one to be avoided if possible. This is evident through the repeated attempts by list members to shut down any problematic talk of race. However, the fact that members of the discussion list are aware that this closure may in itself provide evidence of racial bias attempt to keep the conversation going, albeit in a direction which is deemed ‘safe’. By moving talk towards conversations of race where conciliation and open dialog is the topic of discourse, discussion list participants are able to mitigate the impact of the problematic talk of an in-group member. This is particularly interesting, as van Dijk (1992) argues that this is because speakers resent being perceived as racially prejudiced and thus mobilise different strategies in order to defend the in-group as a whole in an order to save face. In the discussion outlined in extract four we can see how participants jointly

employ avoidance, topic shifting and rationalising of explicit race talk to alleviate any possible accusations of racial bias against the in-group.

In extract 5, below, different strategies have to be mobilised by in-group members in order to perform the job of exclusion and mitigation. The conversation in extract 5 took place five years after the conversation in extract 4, and is of interest as new members of the discussion list who were not part of the core community entered a discussion revolving around student protests. The entry of new posters to the discussion list who are not a part of the core regular community meant that the regular posters had to orient their talk carefully while dealing with issues of accountability, as the new posters posed an unknown entity.

#### Extract Five

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 28

Poster Code: 222

Date: 2011

1. Shall I posit that the we dealing with symptoms of what should correctly be
2. seen as a management of a white supremacists university (or if you like a
3. neo-colonial reality)?these fights, exclusions, disciplinary moves etc are
4. all part of managing the contradictions of an essentially elitist education
5. system that aims to produce managers to manage what some would call
6. neo-liberalism? From this point of view the battles, for the uni or in the uni
7. is ultimately about class elaboration within the same socio-political project
8. which remains anti majoritarian break-troughs! This is an elite warfare, and
9. as a black nationalist I know where I stand between Makgoba
10. and some white ou trying to sustain their privileged position- but I wouldn't
11. mistake my race solidarity with makgoba as representing higher vakues than
12. "let them blacks eat too!" It's a cannibalistic environment, its eat or be
13. eaten- SASCO as an ally of the anc is basically part of the whole project and
14. it can even be said that their strikes are aimed at blocking more systematic
15. questioning all the way to Lithuli House! No?

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 29

Poster Code: 216

Date: 2011

[...]

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 30

Poster Code: 83

Date: 2011

1. Dear [Poster 222], I would very much like to understand your point,
2. specifically what you mean by:
3. "but I wouldn't mistake my race solidarity with [black institutional leader] as
4. representing higher values than "let them blacks eat too!" It's a cannibalistic
5. environment, its eat or be eaten- SASCO as an ally of the anc is basically
6. part of the whole project and it can even be said that their strikes are



7. aimed at blocking more systematic questioning all the way to Lithuli House!
8. No?"

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 31

Poster Code: 222

Date: 2011

1. Simply we must now see the uni as a site of reproduction of
  2. class/privilege/access from this point of view those who were privileged by
  3. apartheid (white males) have hogged these goodies. Now the black (African,
  4. Indian and colored) wants a piece of the action (this would explain the battle
  5. for transformation, the alliances etc)- the main point is access both material
  6. and symbolic power! (if we were talking at the time of economy we would talk
  7. about etc) hope that makes sense
- [...]

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 32

Poster Code: 4

Date: 2011

1. Congratulations if this is the only assertion you don't understand!
2. I must say that I have a problem with people who are external to UKZN
3. having access to this forum. Am I the only one who feels this?

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 33

Poster Code: 222

Date: 2011

1. [Poster 4] in part of the university system what's your problem?. But I know
2. the university is no longer a place for critical thinking these days, it's an
3. enclave for accumulation, power and prestige (more so the reproduction of
4. white supremacy). Note that UKZN is maintained by public
5. resources. What are you afraid of? These illiberal fascist liberals! When
6. Makgoba has you by the throat you will be asking for
7. solidarity beyond the walls of UKZN! People like you make me
8. sick! But then I'm told there are too many racialised factions at that
9. university- are you also hunting for the black student who stole food?

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 34

Poster Code: 141

Date: 2011

1. Time, sure, but as long as people are too scared to say in public what they
2. say in the tearroom, how much good will it do? Solidarity without action is
3. like an ocean without fish. Seems we'll have both pretty soon ...

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 35

Poster Code: 105

Date: 2011

1. [Poster 4] I also find this desire to close out this space to people you call
2. external to the university "very problematic. I am not located in UKZN
3. but I am every breathe part of the uni system. Remember the
4. attacks on the Change list as a club of reactionaries and racists by
5. the executive arose from the fact that there was no black participation on it.
6. the few blacks who posted on it became targeted as friends of whites and
7. therefore against transformation.
8. I can name some of these and their fate is a matter of public record. or is it

9. what you rather have the Change list be. can you count the number of
10. blacks within the university participating on the list?
11. have you ever considered why they are not? the university is a public space
12. for conversation and raising of voices. when voices you do not agree with
13. should be silenced by exclusion, what difference does it make with the calls
14. to silence the media and other forms of expression. what makes your call
15. different from suggestions to close places like CCS? Who are these people you
16. would rather be excluded from the list? my guess is that they are black
17. people like [Poster 222] and myself, No? Very soon, posts will be vetted
18. before they go online? No?

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 36

Poster Code: 4

Date: 2011

1. I don't know how we have made the leap from condemning thuggery to attempting
2. to provide a neo-Marxist analysis of UKZN. The issues
3. originally raised have nothing to do with class or race and everything to do
4. with what type of conduct we should expect from citizens in a country informed
5. by the value i.a. of human dignity.
6. I fear we are losing the battle for decency and respect. There appears to be
7. a growing group of young people who see no value in (or cannot understand the
8. need for) structures and processes to institutionalise conflict.
9. Heaven help us.

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 37

Poster Code: 141

Date: 2011

1. I don't know if anyone else thinks it's an exclusion on the basis of race, but
2. I was wondering about externals on the list in terms of the chance that any of
3. it would lead to claims of "bringing institution into disrepute".

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 38

Poster Code: 222

Date: 2011

1. [Name removed] has finished you my friend. Terrorized! Terrified! Wants to
2. teach!
3. Wow!

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 39

Poster Code: 216

Date: 2011

1. As an 'outsider' who used to be an 'insider' I would say that unfortunately
2. racism is alive and well at UKZN and it is foolish to think
3. that it is 'the end of racism' (as '[Poster 226]' suggests). I think this
4. discussion on Change is extremely useful as it enables people to
5. confront the issues and 'paralysis', rather than retreating to their offices
6. and disengaging.

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 40

Poster Code: 141

Date: 2011

[...]

Thread Number: 965

Post Number: 41

Poster Code: 4

Date: 2011

1. [Poster 222] - In what way are you a part of the university system and why do

2. you have an [Name removed] e-mail address - I presume that you are a

3. post-graduate student?

[...]

13. UKZN is a site for many things, some good some not. It is

14. a site for critical thinking and the advancement of knowledge, but also

15. 'accumulation, power and prestige'. It is not, however, a site of or for

16. white supremacy.

17. I'm sorry that you cannot see beyond your rhetoric and believe that I am your

18. enemy.

19. The VC has had us by the throat for a while now but I will never ask you for

20. support as you have already stated that you would always side with a black

21. nationalist over a white nationalist. Your attitude is one of naked racism.

22. I remain disturbed by the fact that you apparently are unable to see any

23. difference between the opportunistic stealing of food by a hungry person and

24. the systematic actions of bullies who attempt to misuse their positional

25. power for personal gain.

In the extract above the author of posts 28 and 31 states that the university is the site of racial prejudice and holds the contributors to the discussion list accountable for this, for example in the lines: "Shall I posit that the we dealing with symptoms of what should correctly be seen as a management of a white supremacists university (or if you like a neo-colonial reality) ... as a black nationalist I know where I stand between Makgoba and some white ou trying to sustain their privileged position" (post 28, lines 1-10). This explicit racial classification and accusation of racism is in stark contrast to the implicit racial categorization which is more common amongst the core members of the discussion list. This is evidenced in the way responding authors orient their replies to poster 222. The first response to poster 222 and their accusations of racism is a question, "Dear [Poster 222], I would very much like to understand your point specifically what you mean by" (post 30, lines 1-2). This call for clarification using quoting as a means to prevent misunderstanding, in hand with the politeness with which it is expressed, communicates that the argument by poster 222 is unclear to other participants and is in need of explanation, as well as holding the poster accountable for the accusations which they have made. The politeness does the rhetorical work of mitigating the questionability of the questioning poster's intentions, as it leaves discursive room for the questioner to deny any accusations that this is done from a racially motivated perspective. The notion of clarification is echoed in post 32 (line 1), without the politeness present in post 30, where the author states: "Congratulations if this is the only assertion you don't understand!" further emphasizing (explicitly so) the unclear nature of poster 222's comments.

In fact the author of post 32 (lines 1-3) chooses not to respond to the content of posts 28 and 31, ignoring the issues of race raised by poster 222, and instead dwells upon the fact that the poster is external to the regular community of the discussion list.

These attempts to dismiss the argument made by poster 222 fail as the attempt to direct the topic of the discourse away from the content of posts 28 and 31 is met with opposition (post 33, lines 1-2 and post 35, lines 1-3). The authors of posts 28, 31 and 35 hold the author of post 32 accountable for attempting to exclude their contributions from the discussion list, accusing the author of post 32 of excluding them on racial grounds: “[Poster 4] in part of the university system what’s your problem? But I know the university is no longer a place for critical thinking these days, it’s an enclave for accumulation, power and prestige (more so the reproduction of white supremacy)” (post 33, lines 1-4) and “Who are these people you would rather be excluded from the list? my guess is that they are black people like [Poster 222] and myself, No?” (post 35, lines 15-17). In post 35 (lines 3-5) the author reiterates the fact that the discussion list has a history of exclusion based on race: “Remember the attacks on the Change list as a club of reactionaries and racists by the executive arose from the fact that there was no black participation on it.” In these posts the issue of racism is made explicit and holds poster 4 accountable for the discursive actions they have undertaken. Poster 4, in post 32, deals with the issue of accountability by continuing to portray the accusatory authors’ argument as unclear and therefore hard to understand, as illustrated by the first line of post 36 “I don’t know how we have made the leap from condemning thuggery to attempting to provide a neo-Marxist analysis of UKZN” (post 36, lines 1 -2). Through the use of the discourse marker “I don’t know” the author of post 32 and 36 conveys that there is no visible connection between the conversation which is currently occurring and the conversation which preceded it. The author also uses the reference to the membership category “black nationalist” as a means to dismiss the accusatory posters argument as biased: “you have already stated that you would always side with a black nationalist over a white nationalist. Your attitude is one of naked racism.” (post 41, lines 17-18). The author of post 36, also continues to construct poster 222 as illegitimate as in post 41, lines 1-3 “[Poster 222] – In what way are you a part of the university system and why do you have an [Name removed] e-mail address – I presume that you are a post-graduate student?” and dismissing their argument out of hand: “I’m sorry that you cannot see beyond your rhetoric and believe that I am your enemy” (post 41, lines 14-15).

An extremely interesting discursive technique employed in this exchange is the mobilisation of locally shared knowledge derived from the context of the discussion list, and it is here where the history of the discussion list comes into play. An out-group member uses shared knowledge rhetorically as they argue that the management of the university perceives members of the discussion list as racist when they say “remember the attacks on the Change list as a club of reactionaries and racists by the executive arose from the fact that there was no black participation on it” (post 35, lines 3-4). By evoking this shared knowledge the author attempts to undermine any accounts which attempt to portray the exclusion of out-group members as non-racial. However, poster 141 attempts to mitigate and rationalize the calls for exclusion, by turning this shared knowledge in the favour of the in-group. Echoing the disclaimer used by the author of post 36, poster 141 states: “I don’t know if anyone else thinks it’s an exclusion on the basis of race, but I was wondering about externals on the list in terms of the chance that any of it would lead to claims of ‘bringing institution into disrepute’”, (post 37, lines 1-3). Thus, the author makes salient shared knowledge of the disciplinary enquiry as a means to exclude the problematic posters. This is framed as legitimate as these problematic posters pose a threat to in-group members, based on the fact that their utterance may lead to further disciplinary enquiries for participants of the discussion list.

Extracts four and five illustrate how discussion list members manage conversation in which explicit racial talk is occasioned. In both extracts 4 and 5 discussion list members move to close down problematical talk by excluding those conversational participants from which the explicit racial discourse originates. However, there are differences in the means by which participants in the threads contained within extract 4 and 5 attempt to exclude problematic participants. As the legitimacy of the problematic poster to contribute to the list cannot be questioned in extract 4 (as they are a bona-fide member of the university) the in-group discussion list members make salient the fact that the discourse is public and the problematic poster can be held accountable for the statements. This is in contrast to the methods used in extract 5 where the in-group discussion list participants question the legitimacy of the problematic posters to contribute to the discussion. The important aspect of these different methods is the fact that they seek to exclude these participants explicitly on a *non-racial* basis, while keeping race salient in an implicit manner. In extract 4 this is displayed in the ongoing attempts to keep the conversation moving in a ‘safe’ direction, while in extract 5 these attempts are met with opposition, forcing in-group discussion list members to search for alternate methods to manage this exclusion. Shared knowledge is one such method, drawn

from the historical context of the discussion list and which allows in-group members to invoke common understanding implicitly. Another method is the use of category memberships to construct problematic discourse in which race is made explicit as evidence of racial bias on the part of the problematic posters, and is used to hold problematic posters accountable for their statements. As Whitehead (2009, p.327) states, a reference to a membership category (such as ‘white supremacist’ and ‘black nationalist’ in extract 5) can be treated by the audience and speakers “as an account for (or explanation of) social action, as a result of the way it mobilizes common sense knowledge about that category.” Using these categories the members of the discussion list are able to orient themselves to the poster who employed them, and in fact are able to use the explicit categorisation employed by the problematic poster to dismiss that posters’ arguments as biased (ibid.). In this way common sense knowledge is used to mobilise discursive means to shut down and avoid race talk which is undesirable.

This analysis has elucidated the various discursive means which participants of an online discussion list use to manage talk within a context where race may be made salient at any time. Techniques such as echoing, repetition and formally addressing talk have been shown to be of great importance in maintaining the logic of talk online (Herring, 2001). Furthermore, these discursive tools play another important role in talk where race is occasioned to perform a social function. As argued in the literature (Condor, 2006) race may be occasioned in talk to perform a variety of communicative functions, such as seizing the conversational floor, to exclude and to shock. Personal accountability of a conversational participant then becomes key in understanding that the deployment of stereotypes in a social setting, especially in a context where participation comes with high visibility, does not reflect that speaker’s internal state of mind but rather that it has been evoked to achieve some social goal. The use of social category memberships plays an important part in this, as the use of racial stereotypes in conversation is an example of a reference to a particular membership category and the subsequent mobilization of common-sense knowledge evoked through the reference to a stereotype to explain the actions of others (Whitehead, 2009). Consequently the manner in which race is elicited in conversation, either implicitly or explicitly so, determines the discursive strategies which participants in the online space use to orient themselves to the conversation and manage their talk.

### **4.3. Issues for further analysis**

Given the rich source of data afforded by the discussion list and the constraints of length imposed by regulations for dissertations there are a multitude of aspects of the discussion list which could be analysed further. To assume that the ‘truth’ of discursively managing race and talk online has been uncovered would be to fall into the trap of a realist perspective, one which is utterly rejected by the social constructionist paradigm on which this study has been built. Thus, it is entirely possible for the theory outlined in this study to be re-applied to different threads on the discussion list to further determine the reliability and validity of the conclusions reached. Besides this one could also choose look at a single aspect of the discussion list, such as addressivity, and study this in detail to determine how logic in online conversation is maintained, or as another example, the means and methods which participants employ to construct inter-subjective meaning amongst one another discursively.

## 5. Conclusion

The study of discursive social practices enacted within the context of the internet is still relatively in its infancy, in comparison to other forms of social psychological research (Herring, 2001). This study has attempted to contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding talk in interaction and the nuances of computer mediated communication, and given the context in which the study is situated, how race may be occasioned in discourse to perform social actions.

Findings from the analysis of the discourse situated within the discussion list indicate that participants in an asynchronous discourse environment make extensive use of techniques such as addressivity, linking or quoting to maintain the relevancy of their contribution to the conversation (Herring, 2001). As well as these techniques, there is evidence that echoing is a crucial conversational process through which inter-subjective understanding is created amongst members of the discussion list. Echoing is critical in building and contextualizing shared knowledge which allows participants to infer meaning from one another, as it shows previous contributors that the current speaker understands what has been said previously. Within the context of the online space, the analysis has further emphasized how echoing and repetition also do the work of constructing interpersonal involvement between conversational participants who are not necessarily co-present (Gordon & Luke, in press). Furthermore, the creation of common sense knowledge and inter-subjective meaning allow participants in the discussion list to perform various actions with their talk. For example, participants may control the conversational space collaboratively, working together to seize the discursive floor and mitigating what they perceive as problematic talk, as well as jointly avoiding talk around topics which are undesirable to the in-group whilst keeping the conversation on course (Billig, 1998; Condor, 2006).

This leads to the next point which was of interest to this study, and that is how conversational participants in the discussion list orient themselves toward or occasion race in their discourse given the local context in which the list is situated. The analysis displayed that race talk in this context is occasioned to do specific social activity, for example, making use of the rhetorical properties of a taboo phrase and thus drawing in the audience to an inferred shared system of meaning. The creation of inter-subjective understanding allows participants to



gesture towards a racial category membership and force listeners to apply their common sense knowledge in an effort to hear race as relevant for understanding the conversation, thus making them complicit in constructing racial common sense in this context (Whitehead, 2009). However, explicit utterances of racial membership categories, evoked to explain another's actions, seemed problematic to the participants in the discussion list. In order to deal with problematic talk, analyses showed how participants in the discussion either attempted to shift the topic of conversation down 'safer' avenues of talk or made attempts to close down the conversation entirely. If these attempts failed, participants also actively sought to exclude problematic contributors from the in-group of the discussion list.

Although it is very difficult to justify the generalisability in a study which is qualitative in nature, the community represented in the discussion list hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal is a microcosm of South African society. As Whitehead and Wittig (2004) argue, the findings in this study are better described in terms of the discursive practices and rhetorical constructions which are reproduced in a particular community or culture, rather than generalised to the whole population. Thus, the discussion list represents a glimpse into the window of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and the difficulties faced by the institution and staff as a result of the transformation process. We may go one step further and argue that the discussion list represents a space where members of the University of KwaZulu-Natal community retreat to articulate voices which they find hard to do in the current environment of the University. Moving to the macro-social level, one may argue that race is not only the "elephant in the room" in exchanges on the discussion list, but is present in discourse conducted between social actors within the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Thus the discursive techniques employed by participants of the discussion list to manage talk where race is occasioned may not necessarily be constrained to a discussion list, but are also evident whenever the elephant in the room is pointed out or repressed in interaction.

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