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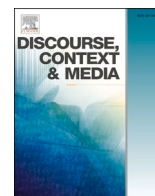
Managing blame for racism in broadcast media

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A B S T R A C T

How do people negotiate blame for racism? In this article we focus on how participants manage the blame-worthiness of racism—as a problem in society, and in relation to specific racist incidents—by scrutinising how sources of racism are formulated in broadcast media. This research develops our understanding of how racism is constructed in society as well as how blame functions to allocate responsibility to different parties. By examining racism as a conversational topic and blaming as a social action, our analysis develops important research into how racism is understood at this time in history and considers what the consequences might be of how blame is allocated for it.

Racism is a complex social problem that is both part of a long and troubled human history, but also a feature of situated everyday interactions. Because racism is so damaging, it makes some form of accountability relevant. Why does it exist, where is it coming from, how does it persist, and who (or what) is to blame?

In this article we focus on how participants manage the blameworthiness of racism by scrutinising how sources of racism are formulated in media interviews such as talk shows and radio programmes. We analyse broadcast media sequences to examine how participants negotiate responsibility for racist incidents or for racism in general. In our analysis, we show how participants in media settings draw upon sequential and contextual resources to negotiate blaming actions in such a way that avoids certain sources of blame.

Racism has been treated as a newsworthy topic in broadcast shows in relation to different socio-political events and the local cultural and social norms–for example, in response to racist events or national and international discussions about racism as a topic. By mass mediating debates and stories about racism, broadcast programmes make available certain stances for the audience to take up, and also have a role in shaping the moral narratives and yardstick by which the audience might make sense of and judge racism in society (c.f., (Rafaely, 2021; Whitehead, 2015, 2018; Xie, 2024; Xie and Durrheim, 2024)). Our contribution is to show how juggling blame and accusation of racism operates in these settings, and how that produces a certain version of what counts as racism and who or what should be held accountable for it.

We begin by reviewing discursive and interactional research on racism and blaming, then describe our methods and data. We present our analysis of data from broadcast interviews to show how blame for racism is managed and constructed by participants. We end by reflecting on the consequences of attributing racism to different blameworthy sources, interactionally and in the wider social discourse. This research develops our understanding of the interactional intricacy and challenge of negotiating and allocating blame for racism.

1. Racism and accountability in social interaction

Previous discourse and conversation analytic research have shown that there is "a general cultural norm against 'prejudice'" (Billig, 2012; see also Augoustinos & Every, 2007a; Billig, 1988), which is complicated by a norm against accusing people of racism (Augoustinos & Every, 2007a; 2007b; 2010; Durrheim, Greener, & Whitehead, 2015). At the same time, racism is a social and moral problem that often demands some resolution or account (Augoustinos & Every, 2010; Stokoe, 2015). In other words, where racism surfaces, it makes relevant the possibility of blame, and alongside it, there will be an orientation to deflecting that blame.

"Racism" is a form of asymmetry–for example, in distributions of resources, in interpersonal treatment, in attitudes, and so forth–based on some assumption and attribution (and differential assessment) of racial differences (c.f., Eidlin & McCarthy, 2020; Jun & Jun, 2018; see also Hall, 2021). Seeing how this asymmetry is produced, topicalised or managed in interactions is one task of research in discourse and

conversation analysis, which has looked at the ways racism is discussed or how it might "surface" in naturally-occurring interaction (Robles & Shrikant, 2021). It might be examined in different ways depending on what setting is the focus, for example, the so-called "elite" texts of political discourse versus the more ordinary environments of conversation (Whitehead, 2017).

Attributing racism and therefore who is responsible for it are key social actions wrapped up in how race trouble (Durrheim et al., 2010) becomes empirically available in social interaction. While responsibility underlies all social action in terms of our commitments to engage in sociality (Goffman, 1955) and the intersubjective orientation to others' intelligibility and preferences to respond intelligibly (Coulter, 1985; Garfinkel, 1967; Samra-Fredericks, 2010), it becomes especially salient when some deliberate wrong can be attributed (Joyce & Sterphone, 2022; Whitehead, 2018). When racism is unignorable or indefeasible, how it gets addressed, denied, explained and so forth will often show some orientation to the responsibility one may bear for being racist, having done something interpretable as racist, or even the fact that racism persists in society (Augoustinos & Every, 2010; Bolden et al., 2022; Potter & Wetherell, 1988). When this attribution of responsibility becomes explicit, it is transformed into the more direct social action of blaming, in which a person or persons are identified as responsible for some problem (Pino, 2022; Pomerantz, 1978; Watson, 1978).

Blaming is an intricate practice. It can cast, and invite questions about, the character and intention of the person who does blaming. This is complicated by racism, which is a complex social issue and whose notion is deniable and contestable across situations (Billig, 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The act of blaming or accusing someone, or an institution, or society for racism could make the speaker themselves accountable for explaining or interpreting the issues in racialised terms (see (Durrheim, 2016; Durrheim, Greener, & Whitehead, 2015)). Blame makes relevant a response that might include apologies and promises, but it also tends to make relevant a reason for the blameworthy situation. Racism is tied to knowledge and intention and, as such, is a resource for constructing complaints, denials, accounts, etc. (Watson, 1978). So an account might serve to justify or minimise racism, to deny certain components of racism, or to accept that racism is present but attempt to disclaim the responsibility of certain people or groups.

Because racism is a complex social issue, it is not always easy to allocate blame for it–it is a phenomenon acknowledged to be simultaneously a feature of interpersonal encounters, where people can say racist things and witness racist attacks and feel the effects of racist actions; and a general feature of society, something that exists as an idea or the outcome of collections of racist incidents, perhaps more than the sum of those incidents (Tileagǎ, 2015). As such, it can be difficult to attribute responsibility, because it is something that involves individual participants, but can also be embedded in cultural ideas and institutions (Billig, 2012; Wodak, 2008), and tangled up in shared discourses that seek in turn to deflect individual responsibility for racism while struggling to hold anything beyond individuals accountable (Halse, 2019).

Racism is a matter which people must deal with in situ. It is in interaction that race (e.g., through the invocation of membership categories) becomes relevant, whereby people interpret racism, attribute racism, topicalize racism and even argue about racism as an abstraction. Racism has been examined in ordinary and institutional encounters from various angles (Robles & Shrikant, 2021; Whitehead, 2017), but a particularly productive context for this sort of analysis is in media interactions. Broadcast media are a space where direct face-to-face interactions can meet mass communication: where people call radio programmes, reporters interview people on the street, talk shows invite guests for a debate, and social media apps share and discuss videos and reports of prior events. Interactional components are featured in broadcast media, and also packaged to be disseminated widely, to respond to current events, and to manage narratives and set agendas (Housley et al., 2018; Hutchby, 2005; Meredith & Potter, 2014;

Steensen, 2014).

One agenda the media attends to, especially in relation to racism, is questioning relevant parties and holding them accountable (Garnham, 2020; Potter & Wetherell, 1988). Thus where blame might be avoided in interpersonal interactions where racism arises (Sue, 2013; Watson, 1978), it is dealt with explicitly in the media. In fact, where racism is seen as a current concern, the media may take it upon itself as the presenter of information, the arbiter of the facts, and distributor of responsibility around racism (Downing & Husband, 2005; van Dijk, 2023). But even where accountability is relevant, blame attribution can be a delicate matter. Racism is one of the strongest types of moral infraction, as much about propriety as pragmatics, and covering aspects of a person's character, their behaviour, and its consequences for other people and for society (Hansson et al., 2022). Thus, it is a high-risk move to make a direct accusation without quite a lot of evidence or expectation of general support (Cheruiyot, 2022).

In their structural organisation and institutional design, media programmes may be sensitive to, or provide certain opportunities for, managing these complicated components of negotiating blameworthiness in relation to racism. For example, different formats have mechanisms for filtering who phones into a radio programme, for inviting live members of an audience, for designing talk for clapping or laughter or even using "tracks" put such apparent audience responses where they want them; guests on programmes may know the agenda or even specific questions they will be asked ahead of time–or conversely, they may be deliberately lulled into a specific situation that will include surprises in order to capture "authentic" responses (Atkinson, 1984; Bell & Gibson, 2011; Cree, 2018; Heritage & Clayman, 2011; Hutchby, 2005; Tolson, 2006).

Discourse and conversation analysts have demonstrated that the moral accountability of racism is embedded, and managed turn-by-turn, in the delivery of broadcast talks. Discursive practices such as repairing one's speech or packaging it as a slip of the tongue (Bolden et al., 2022; Burford-Rice & Augoustinos, 2018), sanctioning or not aligning with a speaker's hearably prejudiced/racist remarks (Whitehead, 2015; 2018), and giving air-time to victims of racism to talk about their experiences (Rafaely, 2021; Xie, 2023, 2024) show how racism or racial expressions are treated as morally and interactionally accountable. The work of blame is inexorably tied to routine practice and mundane methods grounded in the live apparatus and cultural machinery of categorisation work and sequential organisation (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2002; Jayyusi, 1984).

In our analysis, we consider these features of the different formats of broadcast media alongside the sequential structure of social interaction appearing in these media to examine how blame is negotiated for racism and racist incidents. The next section explains our methods, followed by our analysis, and then some reflections on our results.

2. Methods

Our data are drawn from two corpora from English-language television or broadcast media. These were collected for separate projects that concern (1) discussions about race or political debates (that also included race as a topic) and (2) how people report racism. Videos were searched for, and collected from, YouTube and Google, spanning from the late 2010s to early 2020s related to. Searches for our data included keywords that targeted topics of interest (such as "race/racism/racist/racial" or "politics/political"), particular formats such as "interview/debate/discussion/talk show/radio" while also being informed by current events, viral content, and news headlines.

Put together, the corpora added up to about 40 hours of data. For the current project, the 22 recordings were examined for sequences in which participants attempted to locate a source of responsibility or accountability for racism generally or for particular racist incidents. This resulted in a total of ten recordings featuring relevant segments of approximately 2–5 minutes, to longer interviews around 12–15 minutes,

which formed the basis of our collection (Appendix A).

The eleven sequences extracted from the recordings were transcribed using Jefferson (1984) conventions, seven of which are presented in this paper due to space constraints and analytic reasons described in the following section. The data were analysed using conversation analysis (CA) (Schegloff, 2007) which transcribes and examines in detail the turn-by-turn sequences of actions participants produce in naturally-occurring interaction. The analysis also considers the role of categorisation in how categories are sequentially managed in interaction (Housley, 2015). In particular, we.

1. looked at how "blame" was introduced and oriented to as a social action in relation to formulations about racism in society or specific racist incidents, and examined how this was accomplished in the situated media events in which the talk was produced; and
2. examined how categories are sequential deployed as resources for managing attributions of racism and blame for it, as well as the role of categories in making visible participants' mundane reasoning for assigning intention, holding responsible, disclaiming accountability, and so forth.

The next section introduces the analysis with some commentary on the role of racism and blame across our examples, then provides detail about context alongside the specific extracts that illustrate our analysis.

3. Racism blame allocation in broadcast media

In these videos, race and racism are explicit topics as part of the agenda of the interview or discussion. Part of the business of the programme, whether it is radio or television, is to address some subject related to race; and this informs who is present as a guest or interviewee. The race-related agenda means that race/racism is topicalised or made relevant. This topicalization can be done by the interviewer in the opening/introduction of the interview (Clayman, 2007), or headlined as such by the broadcast programme when they clip and share the interview. In the unfolding conversation, the invited participants may be there as victims of racism, experts related to subjects around racism, political personalities with strong public opinions on racism, and so on. In many cases, racism is a subject of the programme in the first place because of some race-related current event in the wider society (particularly the USA and the UK). In these interactions, participants navigate the landscape of racism where they may have to attend to understandings of race and racial identities, tellings of personal experiences with racism, assumptions about individual and structural sources of racism, self-presentations as "not racist," political positions and ideologies around racism, official, academic, and lay theories about racism, and the relationship of racism to hate speech and incitement of violence.

As mentioned in our literature review, racism is a significant social problem and an accountable action, and this makes blame for racism relevant. Our analysis examines how participants manage attributions or implications of societal and individual accountability for racism. Each section consecutively shows how 1) broad structural or institutional blame for racism is rejected, 2) personal blame for histories of racism is rejected, and 3) blame is allocated to specific racist individuals or groups.

3.1. Rejecting institutional blame for racism

In 2021, the British government published a report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities; among various findings, the report suggested that institutional racism was not a significant impact on people's lives, but that family structure and social class had larger effects. There was significant backlash in response to this report, with media outlets and individuals offline, online, and all over the world claiming the report was inaccurate, biased, politically motivated, ethically problematic, scientifically flawed, and so forth. This then led to various attempts to defend the report, of which the first two extracts are examples (Appendix B).

In extracts 1 and 2, the report commissioner, Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock, is interviewed by Channel 5 with regard to the existence of racism or institutional racism in British society. Extract 1 starts toward the beginning of the interview where Dr Aderin-Pocock formulates her initial defence of the report's conclusion.

Extract 1
IR: Interviewer, channel 5
MAP: Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock

```
01    MAP:  no one- uh or- or >anyone associated
02          with the report< no one has said
03          racism doesn't exist (.) I know it does
04          I've experienced racism .hh but systemic
05          racism and uh sort of institutional
06          racisms are quite different things .hh
07          so I think um through the UK there is
08          s- sort of cases of racism .hh but that
09          doesn't mean that we are <systemically
10          racist> as a country and I think it's
11          very very important to divide these two
12          thi:ngs (.) and- and >I think at the moment<
13          they'll be amalgamated together (.) and
14          I do understand that people have some very
15          (.) terrible experiences we talk about
16          hate crimes and >things like that< these
17          things are going on (.) but that doesn't
18          mean that uh the UK is systemically racist.
```

In extract 1, Aderin-Pocock makes an explicit distinction between possible causes or instantiations of racism in UK society. The first is the one is left implicit but is indicated by description that "no one" associated with the report "has said racism doesn't exist" (she adds to this her own experience in lines 2–3, presenting it as a fact). The second racism she introduces is the one rejected by the report and which she describes as "systemic" and "institutional" (L3-4). She suggests these are "quite" different things (L4-5) and then goes on to repeat this distinction in different ways. She refers to the racism that exists with the description "cases of racism" (L6) and again contrasts this with "systemically racist as a country" (L7), introduced with a "we" that aligns herself and listeners with this society, implicating them all in the lack of blame; then describes the former again as "people have some very terrible experiences" and "hate crimes" (L11-12) and then contrasts that once again with the rejection that this entails systemic racism (L14). Thus Aderin-Pocock is to some extent defending a specific report against critique (as well as herself and those associated with that report); but furthermore, she is defending society (specifically, the British society) against the idea that racism is embedded within it in a deep way. If it is a category of individuals and their "cases" (L08) that are responsible for racism, then they are the ones who can be held responsible, rather than suggesting society as a whole, or its institutions, must be held accountable for instances of racism.

Although blame is not explicitly raised in this extract, we see Aderin-Pocock attending to different sources of racism, which makes blame relevant and sets up the expansion in what follows. While Aderin-Pocock (and the interviewer) avoid explicit references to blame throughout the brief interview, Aderin-Pocock nonetheless implicitly attends to it a couple of minutes after the end of extract 1, when she returns to the topic of institutional racism after other sequences that deal with her own history and experiences and the subject of appreciating the positive side of race in modern Britain. She starts off by describing the report as being based in "evidence" despite the "different viewpoints" of the committee that drew up the report. She proposes that systemic and institutional racism can be "measured." She then goes on to locate a historical source of racism, again, to contrast with "today's society".

Extract 2
IR: Interviewer, channel 5
MAP: Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock

suggest there are areas "where racism is occu:rring," but then retrieves the original contrast by suggesting claiming institutional racism is occurring would be a "very very big…stick to wa:ve" (L5-7). It seems to be Aderin-Pocock is orienting to the possible consequences of acknowledging the presence of institutional racism, which is that it might involve something she is characterising with the metaphorical language of "stick waving."[1] It's unclear exactly what this means but there is some evidence that the idiomatic definition means a threat of some sort–so she does orient to a *threat* that might accompany the acknowledgement of the existence of institutional racism. She does immediately thereafter go on to state that it "might be out there" (L8) but returns to the claim that no evidence of it was found in the report. Thus Aderin-Pocock largely dispenses with the scope of racism that would be characterised as institutional, structure or systemic, deflecting that broad target of blame and providing an account that suggests racism is less likely to be that way in "today's society" (L02).

The talk here is explicitly organised around distinguishing different sources of racism, each of which could imply accountability for causing and/or resolving racism in different targets. However, making this possible blame explicit is carefully avoided in this interview, though it seems hinted at in extract 2. In both extracts, Aderin-Pocock's accounts are managed delicately to acknowledge the existence of racism on a smaller and interpersonal scale, whilst rejecting the notion of institutional racism in explaining race and ethnic disparities in the UK. If society as a whole cannot be described as racist, then it cannot be held accountable for specific instances of racism. As someone standing in as a defender of the UK as a not-racist society, Aderin-Pocock is compelled to rely on common and recognisable categories of responsible, racist individuals who have committed specific, racist acts, mostly in the past.

The way in which Aderin-Pocock's speech reflects the complexity of allocating blame in relation to denying institutional racism in the report. On the one hand, racism (as a historical, cultural, societal, and moral problem) is treated as undeniable and unquestionably condemnable (by the sheer fact that a report is produced about racism, and that Aderin-Pocock repeatedly acknowledges the existence of racism in the UK society). On the other hand, blaming racism, especially institutional racism, is treated as too massive (and potentially unmanageable) of a business. It may even be seen as a way that media deflects blame from individuals who should be held accountable (c.f., Housley & Fitzgerald, 2003). On the other hand, to blame an institution or a society for racism

```
01    MAP:   in the past we saw areas where this
02           ha:s happened (.) but in today's society
03           (.) there are um- er- s- sort of areas
04           where racism is occu:rring (.) but to
05           say institutional racism that is a very
06           very big (.) um >er- er- er< a big sort of
07           er stick to wa:ve (.) .hh uh >and- and<
08           institutional racism might be out there
09           (.) but what we encountered and we are
10           >limited in what we've done< we have not
11           encountered sys- institutional racism um
12           through this repo:rt,
```

Here again, Aderin-Pocock contrasts systemic or institutional racism as different and not necessarily present. She does suggest in lines 1–2 that it might have been present in the past "where this ha:s happened," then introduces with contrastive "but" what is projectably a rejection of that. However, she embeds a repair acknowledgement in lines 3–4 to

could hold many individuals accountable, Aderin-Pocock included; or could required far deeper, more serious efforts by society to combat racism. By keeping the source and therefore responsibility of racism

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[1] https://forum.wordreference.com/threads/to-wave-a-stick-at-someone-something.2007337/.

individualised, the efficacy of institutions is upheld and, more importantly in this instance, the moral progression of British society.

By allowing Aderin-Pocock the space to defend the report, the broadcast programme departs from the conventional journalistic practice of neutralism and adversarialness (Clayman, 1992; Heritage & Clayman, 2011). This could potentially make hearable the broadcast programme's stance (Laurier, 2017) as being consistent with Aderin-

of the assumptions of this history, Nance formulates racism as an important component of history.

Extract 3
BM: Bill Maher
BS: Ben Shapiro
MN: Malcolm Nance

```
01    MN:    I mean how can you watch Forrest Gump
02           without even knowing who Nathan Bedford
03           Forrest is.
04           (1.0)
05    MN:    ri::ght? (0.5) I mean these are people who
06           are [hist]orical figures who did=
07    BM:        [bu(t)-]
08    MN:    =ba::d things <no one is actually saying>
09           we wanna go ba::ck and erase everything and
10           resta:rt and talk to you (.) about these
11           things
```

Pocock's and the institution on behalf of which she speaks. This collaborative narrative-making across media institutions is part of what gives rise to the intelligibility of a phrase like "the media" and is itself a resource by which blame is negotiated, where there may be contestation over whether media should support or challenge institutions, merely present views and facts or align with a particular position (c.f., Fetzer, 2006).

3.2. Rejecting personal blame for racism

In 2020, a series of protests in association with the Black Lives Matter movement occurred in the United States in response to the police murder of George Floyd; although BLM activism has a long history, and protests in response to police misconduct and brutality an even longer one, 2020 was an especially watershed moment for getting a lot of public participation and media attention (perhaps especially as it was occurring during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic). Alongside these protests, "critical race theory," an academic theory that takes an institutional and structural approach to racism, gained attention outside academic circles and became highly politicised, since resulting in various investigations into its role in potentially influencing government actors as well as legislation in certain US states to curtail its use in the education system (Appendix C). The next extracts are from an interview conducted on the USA talk show "Real Time with Bill Maher" in 2022 with American media commentators Ben Shapiro (conservative columnist, lawyer and businessman) and Malcolm Nance (author and intelligence and policy analyst) on the subject of critical race theory. Shapiro and Nance are meant to occupy differing positions on this issue in a "debate" style, with host Maher also regularly interjecting his own position, which (in overlap with Shapiro) is also critical of ideas associated with what he takes to be institutional racism and critical race theory.

Prior to extracts 3–4, the host has been discussing with the panellists what critical race theory means and to what extent it's seen as a problem in education, particularly in primary education. After describing some of the state legislatures that have attempted to control or ban the teaching

In this extract, Nance raises a hypothetical in the form of a reverse-polarity question (Koshik, 2002) (L1-3), suggesting the obviousness of the value of knowing history. After a brief pause (L4) where a turn is not taken by either Maher or Shapiro, Nance self-selects a next turn initiated with the agreement-preferring confirmation-seeking "ri::ght?" (L5) to expand his prior turns in an account that warrants teaching history in a way consistent with the idea of seeing racism as institutional. He also raises what this *doesn't* mean, in contrast to the way it has been characterised by the others (and perhaps in the larger argument to which this is referring), which is that it doesn't have to erase or start over (L9-10) (it's not explained what this refers to but given earlier parts of the conversation around "tearing down the system," it might refer to the idea that people subscribing to critical race theory want to remove white people, possibly through violence). So Nance locates blame at least partly in history and specifically "historical figures" (L6) while doing what might be a deflection of blame, or the worst consequences of blame, from the white population (at least in an obvious sense).

After this point, the conversation continues back and forth as Shapiro and Maher discuss whether Nance's characterisation of critical race theory as a historical orientation is accurate, whether meritocracy exists, and the status of statistics that show disparities between Black Americans and other groups, particularly white groups, in the USA. Maher describes his agreement with the facts of these statistics and that they should be addressed, but goes on in extract 4 to provide a disclaimer with an if-then structure that sets up a presumption of what critical race theory or institutional racism might mean, and then a formulation of disagreement.

Extract 4
BM: Bill Maher
BS: Ben Shapiro
MN: Malcolm Nance
AUD: audience

```
01    BM:     becau::z if ra- if critical race theory
02            means (.) making children in school fixate
03            on ra:ce? .h=I'm not for tha:t, [(.) If it makes-
04    AUD:                                     [applause------>
05    BM:     if it's about (.) collective guilt?]
06    AUD:    -------------------------------x]
07            (0.5)
08    BM:     I didn't do anything to your >great-great-great<
09            grandfather.
10            [(1.0)]
11    AUD:    [((laughter))------------------------------->
12    BM:     I don't want to be responsible for that.
13    AUD:    [((laughter))------------------------------->
```

In each of Maher's first two turns (L1-2; L3, L5), he formulates an "if" clause that characterises what he takes critical race theory (or whatever this phrase is standing in for in this discussion) to mean; then follows this with an "then" consequent, and although "then" is not actually stated, the ensuing formulation can be taken to mean that the prior is an account for his disagreement (c.f., Stokoe, 2010). In the first case (L3) it's explicit in the formulation of not being "for tha:t." In the second case (L8-9) it is slightly more implicit by denying a blameworthy action. By saying "I didn't do anything to your >great-great-great< grandfather," Maher positions the blameworthy event ("doing that") as part of a historical past before his time, which suggests distance from blame. This is relevant to the conversation because of the emphasis of critical race theory and institutional racism on the role racism historically played in the development of many US institutions. Maher then follows with a more explicit rejection of the possibility of blame: "I don't want to be responsible for that." Interestingly it is stated in the form of a desire rather than a fact, perhaps suggesting it is not impossible to hold someone responsible for their ancestor's crimes, but still strongly suggesting it would be unreasonable and unfair.

Maher goes on to expand this point with a final third part in his list of reasons (c.f. Stivers, 2015). Rather than disagreeing with Maher about what he's "for" or "not", Nance disagrees with the "if"-initiated premises of each part of Maher's reasons for disagreeing, saying that if those things were true about critical race theory, he *would* agree with Maher. In this way we see that "blame" can be an important dimension of identifying causes of racism, as identifying causes also identifies who should be held responsible.

The contexts for extracts 3–4 includes an audience in the studio: a response from the audience is expected to be part of the interaction, and therefore part of the meaning-making and stance-making. This conversation is also set to be a debate and opinion-orientated where polarised stances are expected. Presenting a debate genre live in front of a present audience invites the audience to take a side, to decide and display a stance about which is potentially less blameworthy and more morally just. The presence of the audience is oriented toward by the speakers in their blaming allocation, e.g., where the historical figures or the deceased generations (e.g., one's great great great grandfather) are made relevant, blaming is done explicitly, whereas it is resisted by current speakers who disclaim personal responsibility.

Part of this resistance hinges on an implied individually-targeted source of responsibility and blame for specific racist incidences, characterised by the ambiguous activity "do anything" to the specified "your great-great-great grandfather" (L08–09). In other words there is an unstated categorical invocation of "a racist," a type of person who does a blamable act; but simultaneously a distancing from the descendant of such a person, who by contrast was not alive to "do anything." Blame is presupposed as conditional on an individual source of blameworthy behaviour as part of how responsibility for racism is negotiated (Watson, 1978). In comparison to the news snippet that allowed for a defence on behalf of a representative of a government report, this more entertainment-tilted talk show discussion is more conversational and more individualised or perhaps personalised (c.f., Reijven et al., 2020). However, the individuals and their apparent personalities are collected in service of debating a social issue as a social issue, in comparison to the next section, which deals with individuals' experiences of racism.

3.3. Allocating blame for racism to racist individuals

The following two extracts are taken from interviews that were broadcast in 2016, within the week of the Brexit referendum in Britain (Appendix D). The push for Brexit was often associated with anti-immigration sentiment across the country, and after the public voted by a small majority to exit the European Union, many people and media sources reported an increase in racist incidents (Abranches et al., 2021; Creighton & Jamal, 2022). Extracts 5–7 are taken from interviews with victims of racism who are invited to talk about their experiences of being racially abused, and their task is to describe what happened from their point of view (Xie, 2023, 2024). In this genre of data, the nature of the misconduct is treated as indisputable (though the culpable party could as well be invited to provide their version of the story and defend their (mis)conducts). One consequence of this genre of victim-oriented interview is that the absent party, or the perpetrator(s), is inescapably portrayed as blameworthy. This blame-allocation (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2003) is, as we will see, often accomplished indirectly and grounded in categorisation work.

Extract 5 comes from *BBC News interview*, broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation in July 2016. In the first part of the interview (not shown in extract), the interviewee, Adudu, reports what she witnessed and how she was targeted. After Adudu and the interviewer talked about the negative impact of the abuse on Adudu, they discussed how Adudu reported it to the police and how it was handled.

Extract 5
TA: Interviewee/victim, Trish Adudu
J: Journalist, Nik Gowing

```
55   TA:   an:d uhm: (.) ee- it- wa- jus- i've- (.)

56         y'know i've lived in this country (.) i'm

57         ⌈prou::d

58   J:    ⌊i was gonna say you couldn't be

59         more british ⌈could you

60   TA:                ⌊£.HHH£ yea i- i- i don't think

61         coventry is a racist city at all i just

62         think .hhhh this one individual ju<st> (.)

63         seem so full of hate nick (.) he >wa<s: (.) he

64         was incessant with ra:ge (.) both at the

65         student n' at me:

66   J:    it's really shaking you up ⌈°isn't it°

67   TA:                               ⌊↑yeah:: telling us

68         to go hhhome n' i don't like using the n

69         wor:d .hhh n' haven't ~heard it (.) directly

70         to °me°~ (.) but ~>it was-< °it was

71         shhhocking°~

72         (.)

73   J:    trish thanks for coming to speak to use anyway
```

As Adudu praises the police for their help, she makes relevant her residency in Britain ("I've lived in this country" L56) and explicitly formulates this experience in a positive direction ("I'm prou::d" L56-57). This categorisation is corroborated by the interviewer as he cuts in Adudu's unfinished turn (L58-59), and upgrades Adudu's self-categorisation. This is accomplished as the interviewer first claims his independence in making the claim, "I was gonna say" (L58). The claim can thus be heard as more credible. Second, he categorises Adudu as British by formulating a yes-expected question (Antaki, 2007), "you couldn't be more British could you" (L58-59). A confirmation and affiliation are thus invited from Adudu.

Indeed, Adudu cuts in the interviewer's unfinished formulation and affirms (L60). It is on the basis of having established her Britishness jointly–and hence making hearable a range of entitlements and ascriptions tied with being British (see Fitzgerald & Housley, 2002)–that Adudu delivers an assessment, "I don't think Coventry is a racist city at all" (L60-61). By making a city in central England relevant and assessing it in racial terms, Coventry can be heard as the place where the reported racism took place. Grounded in an epistemic primacy (i.e., "I don't think"; Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011) and emphasised via an

extreme case formulation (i.e., "at all"; Pomerantz, 2021), Adudu orients to, and manages, the possible hearing of her accounts (i.e., reporting a personal experience of racism on a national broadcast programme) as an accusation against an entire region and people who claim residency in that area. This orientation is also evident in her next utterance. By identifying the target of her assessment, "this one individual" (L62), depicting the individual's action as "incessant" (L64), and characterising the individual using emotive terms "full of hate" (L63) and "with ra:ge" (L64), this individual's character and intention are called to question (Alexander & Stokoe, 2020; Edwards, 2008), and is in turn constructed as blameworthy. The racism reported is to be heard as an exceptional case.

The extract below is also broadcast around the same time, by a live radio programme *BBC Radio 5 Live*. After the interviewee, Jera, reports how she was abused (being told to "get out of my country" by a passer-by on her commute to work), she offers an assessment of the incident.

Extract 6
IR: Interviewer
EJ: Interviewee/victim, Esmat Jera

```
15    IR:     =°em°

16    EJ:     em having reflected on it it's °>it's<°

17            >it's-< incredibly worrying it's a- actually

18            make me quite angry: .h to think of the fact

19            that racism has been legitimised: .h em n'

20            that many people now feel <confi>dent enough

21            to express the ⌈se opinions=

22    IR:                  ⌊wehhll:

23    EJ:     =>and intimidate people<=

24    IR:     =i'm not sure i can te:ll it's legitimised

25            but clearly people are beginning yhh'know

26            there are troubles em:: this (.) was the only

27            °w-° wa- was a white man was it?

28    EJ:     it was yes:

29    IR:     yea:: .h >'ave you ever had anything like

30            this happen to you< before:
```

Jera formulates her experience of the abuse in a subjective, negative, and unambiguous fashion (L17-18). These formulations ("incredibly worrying" L17; "make me quite angry" L18), are then accounted for, wherein "racism" is explicitly topicalised (L19). By stating "racism has been legitimized," the temporal relevance and aftermath of Brexit are invoked. This invocation also elicits the hearing of the political event, and the people involved in engineering Brexit, as responsible and therefore blameworthy for emboldening racism. After topicalising racism explicitly, Jera carries on expanding her assessment, "many people now feel <confi>dent enough to express these opinions" (L20-21). Invoking 'many people' and pluralising 'these opinions', Jera's account scales up the issue and transforms an individual and personal experience to a societal one (potentially). This account is treated as problematic as the interviewer cuts in in line 22 and utters an elongated and breathy "wehhll:." A disagreement is incipient (Heritage, 2018; Pomerantz, 2021).

The interviewer's next turn (L24), produced right after Jera's turn reaching a possible completion (L23), rejects Jera's account. This hedged start, "I'm not sure" reflects IR's treating disagreement as dispreferred (Pomerantz, 2021) or a possible disruption to the progressivity of the interview. The hedge also displays IR's orientation to his deprived ownership of the experience, and thereby lack of entitlement in assessing the incident-in-question (Heritage, 2011; Xie, 2023). IR's following utterances, after producing the contrast device "but," are designed to reformulate the problem (i.e., "clearly people are beginning yhh'know" L25; "there are troubles em:" and "this (.) was the only" L26). These utterances are left unfinished, grammatically and pragmatically. IR's troubled speech is brought to a close as he changes the subject in line 17, and requests Jera to confirm the perpetrator's race membership

category ("was a white man was it?"). Invoking a race category, on the one hand, serves to return to and legitimise Jera's topicalisation of racism. On the other hand, 'a white man' makes visible (c.f. (Whitehead & Lerner, 2009)) the common-sense understanding of who, or a category of members, is to blame for racism (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Watson, 1978). The uses of a singular article 'a' and singular pronoun 'man' localise the incident, formulating it as a one-off case. Embedded in IR's clumsy disagreement is his management of the basis for his disagreement, namely, resistance to blame Brexiteers and Brexit for racism.

This interview contrasts with extract 5 in that the blaming in extract 5 is allocated to an individual, whereas in extract 6 the blame is attributed to "many people." This "many people" can be heard as a "set-of-members" ((Sacks, 1992) p. 335), who engineered and/or voted for Brexit. The interview's troubled utterances exemplify his uptake of this inference – that Brexit voters are, in Jera's words, "express these opinions and intimidate people." By cutting in Jera's turn and proffering a mitigated disagreement, the interviewer jointly manages Jera's accusation and downgrades it. What is common in both extracts 5 and 6 is the collaborative negotiation (c.f., Watson, 1978), between the interviewers and interviews, about who or what is to blame for racism, and that this negotiation is done after the interviewees described what happened to them.

In comparison, the next extract occurs on a talk show that does not include an audience, prohibiting the opportunity to engage with and respond to recipients other than the interviewers (whose affiliative and sympathetic stance is established from the outset, i.e., in the opening/introductory turn of the interview). The final extract is from an interview conducted on *This Morning*, a day-time chat show broadcast by British television network ITV. In October 2018, a passenger on a Ryanair flight racially assaulted Delsie Gayle during boarding. A fellow

passenger filmed the insult and shared the recording online. The footage caught the public's eye instantly. *This Morning* invited Delsie and her daughter (who was also on the flight) to talk about the incident on 23 October 2018. Extract 7 below shows the beginning of the clipped interview (based on what is made accessible by *This Morning*'s YouTube channel).

Extract 7

IR_E: Interviewer, Eamonn Holmes
IR_R: Interviewer, Ruth Langsford
D: Interviewee and the victim, Delsie Gayle

```
1    IRE: >first of all<=

2    IRR: =[ehhr-

3    IRE: =[well done to that lovely passenger who was

4         be<hind> uh that <horrible> insidious man:

5         an::d eh delsie: >is getting< very upset (.)

6         just watching that n- n' naturally enough

7         caro:l because .hh y'know you brought her on

8         the plane: she got- she was preboarded because

9         of her arthritis n' she can't (.) uh mo:ve .h

10        you got to the seat (.) and

11        [when:: did you::=

12   D:   [((snuffling))

13   IRE: =<all realise> something was wrong:: when was

14        it- when did it get really <bad>
```

In introducing the incident and the interviewees, the interviewer, IR_E, produces a series of categorisations that invite the audience to hear and judge the actor's character (Alexander & Stokoe, 2020). As Watson (1978) remarked, 'membership categorizations and other items of speech may be used as resources in the making of complaints, accusations, excuses, and other 'blame-negotiators' (p.106; see also Housley & Fitzgerald, 2003). The first categorisation is to be heard as a sarcasm, "well done to that lovely passenger" (L3), as it is succeeded with unequivocally negative characterisation, "that <horrible> insidious man:" (L4). Assessing this passenger characterologically, and announcing it as the first thing on his agenda (">first of all<" L1), IR_E not only proffers the audience with unambiguous resources to hear the subsequent storytelling (Sacks, 1992), but he also works up this man's blameworthiness (Watson, 1978). The audience is invited to hear the incident as a result of the man's character – "horrible" and "insidious" (Alexander & Stokoe, 2020; Edwards, 2008), rather than a situation-driven or accidental act. The interviewee and victim, Delsie, is in turn exonerated from needing to judge this perpetrator herself – which is something that

could elicit questions about Delsie's credibility and intention in sharing her experience publicly (Edwards, 2005; 2007; Potter, 1996; Whitehead, 2009).

The blameworthiness of the man is reified as IR_E reports for, and speaks on behalf of, Delsie (L5-9). IR_E's reporting is done on the basis of making available, and thereby comment-able in the unfolding interview, things that are less observable and potentially inaccessible to the audience. First, IR_E reports Delsie's emotional reaction to watching the recording (L5-6). Using present participle, ">is getting< very upset" (L5), IR_E's description is packaged as a live report of what he observes here and now. Although it is not shown in the clipped video, IR_E's reporting makes hearable that the videorecording of the incident was just played for the audience ("just watching that" L6). Juxtaposed with reporting Delsie's emotional reaction, the audience is allowed to hear Delsie's emotion as attributable to her watching, or being reminded of, the incident (Gramner and Wiggins, 2020). In this way, the negative and lasting impact of the abuse on Delsie is enacted.

Second, IR_E offers an explanation for Delsie's emotional reaction ("naturally enough Caro:l because" L6-7). This explanation is built stepwise and delicately around who Carol is and what she does. First, the direct reference to Carol, i.e., by name, selects her as the speaker for the inchoate question (L11-14; Clayman, 2007; Heritage & Clayman, 2011). Second, the succeeding description portrays Carol as responsible for supporting Delsie in getting on the flight ("brought her on the plane" L7-8). Carol's role, as a carer for Delsie, is made hearable. This account is followed by a sub-explanation wherein Delsie's clinical condition is invoked, "she was preboarded because of her arthritis" (L8-9). Juxtaposed with an ancillary insertion, "she can't uh move" (L9), Delsie's immobility, and thereby vulnerability, are worked up. Delsie's audible snuffle in line 12 functions to corroborate with and reinforce IR_E's

account of her "getting upset". The interviewer's introductory turn is thus built to pre-emptively inoculate Delsie from being heard as responsible for the trouble.

It is through IR$_E$'s portrayal that the audience is invited to hear and judge the man's blameworthiness (for targeting a vulnerable person), whilst mitigating the possible hearing of Delsie as the trouble source. This arrays the characters of this telling in morally categorised positions where an obviously and objectively "bad" person has targeted and harmed an obviously and objectively blameless, vulnerable person. This serves to unmask some social trouble, but it is not produced as though intercalated into the social–rather, it is a horrid but isolated incident, about which the broadcast retelling serves to raise awareness and sympathy for the target, and anger or indignation toward the source of assault, while constraining the blame to that source's particular and exceptional moral failings.

In the examples from our data, participants are attentive to the implications of allocating blame to certain sources of racism. In the particular contexts of their production, mediated interactions provide resources for candidate distributions of responsibility. However, not all distributions are equally available or valued at all times. In the next section we reflect on the implications of the results of our analysis.

4. Reflections on blame and racism in the media

In the data we have presented, participants negotiate reasonable sources of blame for the general existence of racism in society, and/or for specific racist incidents. In extracts 1–4, participants orient explicitly to the concept of institutional or systemic racism because the issue of this type of racism, and its broad sources of blame, has been raised in some way by current events. In extracts 1–2 the focus is on rejecting institutions as a source of racism, while in extracts 3–4 the focus is on avoiding blaming individuals for historical racism. In extracts 5–7, participants are navigating the sensitivity of victims' experiences of racism, and in so doing, blame for incidents that targeted these victims becomes relevant. The blame is allocated to individuals responsible for those racist incidents, as racist individuals, and attributing racist sentiments or motivations to larger groups or social forces or associating it with politics is carefully managed. Across these instances, participants orient to avoiding general, societal blame that might be borne by populations, cultures or institutions, and instead situate the blame for racism in specific situations, by specific people, in the context of progress toward a less racist society.

Blame is characterised by the location of a problem and the attribution of responsibility for that problem; this attribution proceeds in part through a categorical association between blameworthy actions and individuals who enacted those actions (Pino, 2022; Pomerantz, 1978; Watson, 1978). But a dilemma emerges for participants when there isn't a concrete individual with a concrete reason to which blame can be attributed. We show that the action of blaming is complex in the context of racism, involving a careful negotiation (Watson, 1978) which carries with it a strong orientation to avoiding being seen as racist or being blamed for racism (e.g., Augourstinos & Every, 2010; van Dijk, 1992). Participants in broadcast media interviews have a special public responsibility that amplifies this dilemma (e.g., Laurier, 2017): the media are seen as informing the public and holding wrongdoers accountable, and yet are also themselves accountable to certain societies and publics for providing a reasonable (and sometimes also entertaining or even lucrative) narrative (Brushwood Rose and Low, 2014) for the

consumption of these audiences. This highlights the problem of public ethics, where local moral reasoning and complex societal structures may conflict in practice (c.f., Housley & Fitzgerald, 2003).

Our analysis focuses on some talk show and radio interviews, but nonetheless has important implications for how the media in general, in the setting of their managed production, orient to particular stances toward racism and how blame for racism could (or should) be allocated in society. The disinclination to attribute or avow responsibility for broad social instantiations of racism is a practical problem (what is to be done about the abstraction of responsibility in such situations?) but also a moral problem. By focusing on specific people or reasons for racism, this social problem can be packaged as something that seems less overwhelming, more manageable, and attributable to exceptional elements of society, rather than embedded in its very structure. This is a challenge for actually understanding and addressing structural racism and its insidious and harmful effects. The analysis also demonstrates how the practices for managing accountability and blame, for categorising and holding others responsible, and for managing attributions and sources of racism, trade on the practical intelligibility of everyday interactional practices. Participants' negotiations of racism and blame are not of a different kind than mundane social interaction, but use these same resources. This is how, as Watson (1978) points out, someone can disavow racism by drawing on mundane reasoning tying categorisation with blameworthy individual actions; but conversely, that reasoning can be countered by accusations of unconscious or individual racism.

Future research could further explore how structural racism is dealt with and received by media audiences, as well as in political and other institutions where decisions and policy around racism can be consequential not just for public opinion, but for the lives of people affected by racism. More research could also be done using conversation analysis (CA) to show precisely how participants construct blame for racism in ways that manage these complex and competing social agendas around personal, societal, and institutional responsibility. Our research provides a window into the practices by which specific media formats allow for racism blame to be allocated in accordance with specific topicalisations of racism and in response to incidents or broader social conversations about racism, thus contributing to ethnomethodological work that provides "insights into the interface between the micro organization of media events and the macro concerns of wider society" (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2002).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jessica S. Robles: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Yarong Xie:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

data linked in appendix

Appendix A

Data List (see Appendices B-E for data links and context for specific extracts)

Title	Date Service	Segment Length (minutes) Extracts in analysis
Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock defends findings of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities	1 April 2021 Channel 5	04:50 Extract 1, Extract 2 (see Appendix B)
Ben Shapiro and Malcolm Nance on Critical Race Theory	7 August 2021 Real Time with Bill Maher (HBO)	09:30 Extract 3, Extract 4 (see Appendix C)
BBC presenter Trish Adudu in tears after racist abuse	2 July 2016 BBC News	01:47 Extract 5 (see Appendix D)
Brexit 'racism' victim: 'I was told to get out of my country'	30 June 2016 BBC Radio 5 Live	02:00 Extract 6 (see Appendix D)
The 77-year-old woman racially abused on a Ryanair flight	23 October 2018 This Morning	07:42 Extract 7 (see Appendix D)
Racist incident at the University of Warwick	6 October 2017 RAW 1251AM	In the interest of space and for purposes of our argument, extracts from these recordings were used in analysis but not included in this article. See Appendix E for data links.
I was targeted because of the colour of my skin	12 March 2018 This Morning	
Racist bullies tormented my son and now he's afraid to leave the house	7 August 2018 This Morning	
Callum Hudson-Odi's mature response to racism chants in Montenegro	26 March 2019 ESPN UK	
Coronavirus unleashes anti-Asian racism around the world	10 February 2020 DW News	

Appendix B

Context

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-56585538, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/19/uk/un-uk-race-report-intl-gbr/index.html, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/16/government-race-report-evidence

Data

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = pZM02kVIQZI

Appendix C

Context

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Lives_Matter

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Floyd_protests

https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article = 1046&context = fac_working_papers

https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05

Data

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = dwgsbZ1MsAE

Appendix D

Context

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_United_Kingdom_European_Union_membership_referendum

Data

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = CJVhN7DX5RI

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = DSHszDYYWgg

https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03zzlc1

Appendix E

Data

https://youtu.be/Mnl6hjghjj0

https://youtu.be/PJ2UV9o1LeQ

https://youtu.be/pIYdpWGFtG4

https://youtu.be/2lDkN_DYdLs

https://youtu.be/RdLJhzx7tJ4

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