

# UC Santa Barbara

## UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

### Title

Using Racial Incompetence as a Comedic Device and Tacit Method of Anti-Racist Education

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1dm924mr>

### ISBN

978-1-80041-539-3

### Authors

Whitehead, Kevin A.

Cheeks, Lillian

### Publication Date

2024-03-01

Peer reviewed

Using Racial Incompetence as a Comedic Device and Tacit Method of Anti-Racist Education

Lillian Cheeks

Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara

Kevin A. Whitehead

Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara

and Health Communication Research Unit, School of Human and Community Development,

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Published in: H. Z. Waring & N. Tadic (Eds.), *Critical Conversation Analysis: Inequality and Injustice in Talk-in-Interaction* (pp. 174-194). Bristol, U.K.: Multilingual Matters.

## INTRODUCTION

A key contribution of Garfinkel's early development of ethnomethodology is his demonstration of the systematic moral enforcement of common-sense knowledge – which Garfinkel (1956) describes 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” (p. 185). As Garfinkel's famous “breaching experiments” and other related research demonstrated, those who fail to use common-sense knowledge in designing their actions and interpreting the actions of others risk being seen as incompetent or even malicious (see e.g. Garfinkel, 1963, 1964, 1967; Heritage, 1984a).

Similar insights are evident in Sacks's (e.g. 1972a, 1972b, 1992) pioneering work on membership categorization devices. In demonstrating how membership categories serve as “the store house and the filing system for the common-sense knowledge that ordinary people – that means ALL people in their capacity as ordinary people – have about what people are like, how they behave, etc.” (Schegloff, 2007, p. 469), Sacks's work describes the range of morally-enforced expectations, entitlements and obligations associated with categories. Consistent with Garfinkel's findings, these features of common-sense knowledge about categories provide a set of systematic resources that members of particular categories can use in designing their social actions, and observers can use in making inferences – including moral – about the nature and bases of their actions (also see e.g. Hester & Eglin, 1997; Kitzinger, 2005; Raymond, 2019; Raymond & Heritage, 2006; Whitehead, 2020).

These foundational insights are also consistent with Rawls and Duck's (2020) recent account of tacit racism, which takes inspiration from Garfinkel's work, combined with Du Bois's (2003 [1903]) theory of “double consciousness,” to describe how asymmetries of knowledge

with respect to morally-enforced expectations associated with Black versus white participants are a systematic basis for the tacit (re)production of structural racism in everyday interactions. As Du Bois (2003 [1903]) notes, Black people, by virtue of their subjugated position in a racialized social order, are required as a matter of survival to know how white people see them and expect them to act. White people, on the other hand, are not similarly required to see themselves through Black people's eyes, or to contend with the severe consequences of not knowing about the world of the racial Other that Black people pervasively face. In examining how these racialized asymmetries of knowledge feature in everyday interactions, Rawls and Duck (2020) specify how racism may be tacitly produced in ways that are stark and painful for the Black people subjected to it, but to which the white people involved are able to remain completely oblivious (also see Mueller, 2017, 2020).

These common-sense race-based expectations and entitlements can also structure and/or serve as a set of resources for the production and reception of humor. For example, Scarpetta and Spagnoli's (2009) study of stand-up comedy demonstrates the importance of the respective categorial (including racial) identities of the comedian and audience members in shaping the treatment of jokes as humorous as opposed to offensive (including racist). More generally, there is long-standing recognition of incongruity between an expected action and an actually-produced one being a systematic device for the production of humor (see e.g. Glenn, 2003; Okazawa, 2021, 2022; Stokoe, 2008).

In using interactions portrayed in television situational comedies ('sitcoms'), Stokoe (2008) and Okazawa (2021, 2022) demonstrate how conversation analytic methods and findings can offer insights into how writers and actors of these scripted interactions display and exploit common-sense knowledge as devices for producing humorous incongruities. Specifically, Stokoe

(2008) shows how sitcoms use portrayals of characters breaching the rules of turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) and the expectations associated with preference organization (Pomerantz, 1984); Okazawa (2021) examines portrayals of characters' resisting categorization before acting in recognizably category-bound (Sacks, 1972a, 1972b, 1992) ways; and Okazawa (2022) examines how characters' utterances that are ambiguous with respect to whether they serve to categorize others are used to portray humorous misunderstandings that implicate category-related moral orders.

In this chapter, we build on these lines of research, and thereby contribute to critical conversation analytic research on race and racism, by considering how television sitcom and comedy sketch show writers and actors exploit features of the asymmetrical distribution of common-sense knowledge about race as a device for producing humor. Specifically, we consider cases in which white characters are portrayed as laughably incompetent with respect to common-sense knowledge about categories of people of color, thereby constructing humorous incongruities between expectations for how such knowledge *should* be used in designing and interpreting actions, and the ignorance portrayed through the characters' *actual* actions. In addition, we examine how this device serves as a tacit critique of the types of 'clueless' actions by white people – and the associated privilege and power they serve to (re)produce – that may be well-intentioned while nonetheless being experienced by recipients of color as hostile or racist (cf. Essed, 1991; Rawls & Duck, 2020).<sup>1</sup> We thus consider how these scripted exchanges tacitly provide anti-racist education, with the portrayed actions of the characters serving as cautionary tales of racial and/or racist incompetence.

---

<sup>1</sup> Also cf. Joyce, Humă, Ristimäki, Almeida and Doehring's (2021) analysis of the sexist practices of "mansplaining."

## DATA AND METHOD

Our data set consists of recordings from interactional exchanges depicted in sitcoms and comedy sketch shows in which racial categories are treated as relevant, either through explicit mentions or via implicit allusions to race (see Whitehead, 2009) produced by the characters portrayed in the shows. The recordings were collected both from shows in which race is consistently topicalized ('racial comedies') and those in which it is made relevant more fleetingly while not being a consistent topical theme. Through repeated viewing of the recordings, we identified a range of ways in which common-sense knowledge about race was deployed and/or subverted in the portrayed interactions. The analysis we report below focuses on a collection (see Schegloff, 1996) of 87 cases in which characters are portrayed as exhibiting various forms of the racial incompetence described in the foregoing discussion. These cases were transcribed using Jefferson's (2004) conventions and subjected to detailed critical analysis grounded in ethnomethodological and conversation analytic principles.

As is unavoidably the case in undertaking any sociological analysis, we necessarily used our own members' knowledge in order to recognize the members' knowledge being used, often tacitly, by the writers and actors who produced our data (cf. Garfinkel 1967). We have worked throughout our analysis, on a case-by-case basis, to describe such members' knowledge as explicitly as possible, especially when analyzing details that may be opaque for readers who are unfamiliar with the features of common-sense knowledge about race that are evidently being mobilized in portraying characters' racial incompetence.

The use of interactions portrayed in sitcoms as a data source departs from the focus on unscripted, naturally-occurring interactional data on which conversation analytic research was historically developed (see e.g. Heritage, 1984a; Sacks, 1984; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson,

1974). However, in following a similar approach to that used by Stokoe (2008) and Okazawa (2021, 2022), as noted above, we treat these shows as scripted but nonetheless naturally-occurring products of writers' and actors' professional activities – as opposed to being generated by researchers, or for research purposes (cf. Potter, 2002; Speer, 2002). That is, we examine them for the ethnomethods and social resources evidently used to produce them, without proposing them to be equivalent to or a substitute for the types of 'real-world' interactions they portray.

## ANALYSIS

The extracts we examine in this section were selected so as to include both cases that most clearly illustrate the core features of the phenomenon of portrayed racial incompetence around which our collection was built, and that demonstrate the range of variation in terms of specific types of racial incompetence evident across the collection (cf. Schegloff, 1996). We begin with relatively simple cases, characterized by the portrayal of characters' deficiency in one specific domain of common-sense racial knowledge, before progressing to cases that include more complex intersections of multiple domains of such incompetence.

Extract 1 shows an instance of the racial incompetence of *The Office's* main character, Michael Scott,<sup>2</sup> in relation to his lack of knowledge of race-based entitlement to produce particular actions – in this case, jokes. This is portrayed in Michael's reflections on the positive reception of a comedic routine performed by Black comedian Chris Rock in contrast to its negative reception when performed by Michael himself. Michael's reflections are contextualized by the portrayal of an all-staff diversity training, in which the trainer, Mr. Brown, asks the

---

<sup>2</sup> Speaker designations in the transcripts throughout our analysis consist of the first three letters of the character's name or (for unnamed characters) situationally relevant category.

participants about their familiarity with *the Chris Rock routine* (line 05), which he identifies as the *exact incident he was brought in here to respond to* (lines 03–04). Michael’s role in the incident is then tacitly revealed by the camera panning to his concerned face (lines 08–09) after showing the other participants’ unanimous displays of familiarity with the incident (line 06), before cutting to a documentary-style interview in which Michael provides his reflections (lines 13–20).

(1) *The Office*; S1, E2

01 Bro: Um, so looking through the cards I’ve noticed that  
02 many of you wrote down the same incident, which is  
03 ironic because it’s the exact incident I was brought  
04 in here to respond to. Now how many of you are  
05 familiar with the Chris Rock routine?  
06 (3.0) ((camera pans to participants raising hands))  
07 Bro: Hm:.  
08 (0.5) ((camera zooms in on Michael’s concerned  
09 facial expression))  
10 Bro: Very good.  
11 (.)  
12 Bro: Okay.  
13 Mic: .hhh How come Chris Rock can ↑do a rou↓tine, (.)  
14 and everybody finds it hilarious and groundbreaki:ng,  
15 (0.5) ((swallows)) then I: go and do the exact ↑same  
16 rout↓ine >↑same comedic t̄iming,< .hh and people file



17 a complaint to corporate.  
18 (1.2)  
19 °Is it because I'm white, and Chris is Black?°  
20 (2.0) ((looks upward, then tilts head))

Michael's reflections are formulated as a puzzle, as he questions why there was a difference between receptions of Rock's performance of the routine and his own. He uses the extreme case formulations (see Edwards, 2000; Pomerantz, 1986) *everybody*, *hilarious* and *groundbreaking* in characterizing the positive reception of Rock's performance of the routine (line 14), as well as in emphasizing that he had performed *the exact same routine* (lines 15–16) only to have it met with a *complaint to corporate* (line 17). Viewers with even passing familiarity with Rock's racial identity and his highly racialized and profane style of comedy could readily infer that race is the solution to the puzzle Michael has posed (cf. Whitehead, 2009). That is, as a white person, Michael lacks the race-based entitlement to make the kind of racialized jokes that Rock's routines typically include (also see Scarpetta & Spagnoli, 2009), and thus Michael's violation of this entitlement is what occasioned the complaint. Michael is thus portrayed as lacking basic awareness of these race-based entitlements, and as having failed to gain such awareness over an extended period of time following his performance of the routine, spanning the filing of the complaint and the completion of the diversity training.

Michael's portrayed racial incompetence is also underscored by two further features of his formulation of the puzzle, and his ongoing efforts to solve it. First, in noting that his performance of the routine was done with the *same comedic timing* (line 16) as Rock's, Michael conveys that he has entertained and ruled out the possibility that his performance was deficient in terms of its technical features. He is thereby portrayed as being able to reflect on a highly

technical basis for comedic failure while being unable to recognize a racial basis that is more fitted to both the negative reception he received and the formal complaint and diversity training that followed. Second, as Michael pivots to speculating about whether he and Rock's respective racial categories constitute the basis for these negative responses (line 19), he is portrayed as having belatedly considered the potential importance of race in this regard. However, his whispering of this speculation portrays him as treating any possible use of a racial account as a delicate action (cf. Lerner, 2013) to which he has diminished entitlement, and thus as possibly implying that it is the people who used race to interpret his performance of the routine who acted inappropriately, rather than his own actions being inappropriate. Moreover, his displays of thoughtful consideration of this possibility that follow (shown in his upward glance and head tilt at line 20) treat this explanation as still a matter of uncertainty. He is thereby portrayed as confirming his inability to recognize race as the obvious solution to the puzzle even after explicitly entertaining it.

Extract 2, from the sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, portrays a (white) British intern, Rob, making an ostensibly innocuous lunchtime suggestion that portrays him – and ultimately all of the other non-Black participants in the scene – as racially incompetent.<sup>3</sup> Like Extract 1, this case shows a character who exhibits incompetence with respect to knowledge of race-based entitlement to produce a particular action, with the proposed action in this case also intersecting with portrayed deficiencies in common-sense knowledge of racialized foods, names and places.

(2) *Saturday Night Live*; S45, E6

---

<sup>3</sup> Since none of the characters in this sketch other than Rob are named, we have referred to them using the first names of the actors who play them: Heidi (Gardner), Ego (Nwodim), Kenan (Thompson) and Melissa (Villaseñor).

01 Hei: Oka:y everybody, the contracts are officially signed.

02 Ego: (H[AH!][ALL RI::GHT!

03 Ken: [WOO[::]! ((claps))

04 Mel: [AWESOME[::]!

05 Hei: [Yeh, so lunch is on the company

06 today:, and our:: new intern Ro:b from the UK is going

07 to pick it up, thank you Ro:b!

08 Rob: No problem!

09 (1.0) ((audience laughter))

10 Hei: So, where we goin'? Any suggestions?

11 Mel: Oh, there's a new Thai place that's supposed to be good.

12 (0.2)

13 Ego: Or how about pizza? That's always fun to share.

14 (0.2)

15 Rob: Sorry, (0.2) can I make a suggestion?

16 (0.2)

17 Hei: Oh, sure!

18 (0.5)

19 Rob: Cool. Well, uh: I thought we could- I could get us all

20 those new chicken sandwiches from Popeye:'s.

21 (4.5) ((audience laughter; dramatic music; camera

22 zooms to Kenan's shocked facial expression))

23 Ken: From where now?

24 (0.8) ((audience laughter))

25 Rob: From Popeye's.

26 (0.2)

27 Rob: They don't have one back in England, but it's uh:

28 just like KFC, right?

29 (0.8)

30 Ken: No.

31 (1.2) ((audience laughter))

32 Ken: No, it's not.

33 (1.0) ((audience laughter))

34 Rob: Well either way I thought I could go there by myself

35 and get li:ke (.) fifteen chicken sandwiches?

36 (2.2) ((audience laughter; dramatic music; camera

37 zooms to Ego's shocked facial expression))

38 Ego: By yourself?

39 (0.3) ((audience laughter))

40 Ego: So you wanna go to a Popeye's alone, in the middle of

41 lunch rush, (.) then buy up all the chicken ↑sandwiches?

42 (0.8) ((audience murmur))

43 Rob: Yeah. That's the plan.

44 (0.6) ((audience laughter))

45 Ken: Is there even a Popeye's around here?

46 (0.5)

47 Rob: Sure. (0.2) I:: found one just down the street here on  
 48 uh:: Frederick Douglass Boulevard.  
 49 (2.5) ((audience laughter; dramatic music; camera zooms  
 50 to Ego and Kenan's shocked facial expressions))  
 51 Ken: Did you say (.) Frederick Douglass Boulevard?  
 52 (0.8) ((audience laughter))  
 53 Rob: Yeah, that's it, it's right betwee:n (.) the liquor store  
 54 and thee Foot Locker.  
 55 (6.0) ((dramatic music; camera pans to Ego and Kenan's  
 56 shocked facial expressions; Ego stands up, shaking head))  
 57 Mel: Sounds great, I love chicken sandwiches.  
 58 (0.8) ((audience laughter))  
 59 Hei: Sure, I'm down, ((continues))

In line 06, Heidi introduces Rob by not only stating that he is the new intern, but also that he is from the UK, thereby using two categories despite, as Sacks's (1972a, 1972b) economy rule notes, only one category being required in order to do adequate reference. The mention of Rob's citizenship category appears to be designed to convey Rob's status as an 'outsider,' foreshadowing that this category will account for some future conduct he is going to produce. Following discussion of where they might get lunch from (lines 10–13), Rob suggests getting the *new chicken sandwiches* from the fast-food restaurant, Popeye's (lines 15–20). This suggestion invokes the nationwide phenomenon at this time of extremely high demand for these sandwiches following their introduction in Popeye's franchises, which was accompanied by media reports of numerous Popeye's locations running out of the sandwiches, and of violent conflicts between

customers who were waiting to buy them. Rob's suggestion to go there and buy these sandwiches for multiple people (lines 19–20 and 34–35) is thus recognizable as a provocative and potentially recognizably racialized attempt to claim for white consumption an item to which Black people might claim a special entitlement.<sup>4</sup>

The nonchalant way Rob produces this suggestion portrays him as seeing it as a completely unproblematic one – and thus underscores his displays of the privilege and power of one who takes for granted his right to pursue sought-after items without regard to the potential consequences of doing so. In contrast, immediately following Rob's initial delivery of the suggestion, there is a substantial silence (line 21), during which the camera zooms, accompanied by dramatic music, to show the shocked expression on the face of Kenan (a Black character), thereby conveying the problematic nature of the suggestion. While the basis for these contrasting orientations by the characters is not explicitly revealed, their visibly contrasting racial categories, along with Rob having previously been identified as being from the UK, provides for the inference that Rob's suggestion should be immediately recognizable by any 'insider' as ill-advised and/or dangerous. The audience laughter that accompanies this move displays their appreciation of the humor produced by the juxtaposition of Rob's nonchalance and Kenan's shock, and possibly indicates their appreciation of the category-based common-sense this contrast trades on. Moreover, this juxtaposition is further underscored by Kenan's subsequent incredulous question (line 23), which uses other-initiated repair as a vehicle for challenging what Rob has proposed (see Schegloff, 1997) – and is registered as such by the audience's responsive

---

<sup>4</sup> This racialized entitlement is explicitly conveyed in a later part of the sketch (not transcribed), in which Kenan's character explains to Rob's that *there's not many things in this country where our people get first dibs, but the Popeye's chicken sandwich, that's one of 'em.*

laughter (line 24). As Schegloff (1997) observes, the use of this practice relies on the recipient recognizing that the initiation of repair is also implementing a challenge, which they can display by responding in a way that takes up both the repair and the challenge. Rob's casual repetition of his suggestion (line 25) portrays him as taking up the repair while remaining oblivious to the challenge, and thus as being incompetent both at registering Kenan's shock and at recognizing the deficiency in his own common-sense knowledge that underpins the disjuncture between them.

The nationality-based account for Rob's ignorance is then further elaborated, as he reports the absence of Popeye's in England, before proposing that *it's just like KFC* (lines 27–28). Kenan's immediate and blunt response (line 30) – produced in a preferred turn shape (Pomerantz, 1984) despite its disalignment with what Rob has proposed – conveys the stark contrast between Rob and Kenan's understandings of the implications of Rob's suggestion. Rob's response again portrays him as failing to register Kenan's shock, and the associated asymmetry in their respective category-bound common-sense knowledge, as he produces a modified repeat of his plan, now explicitly proposing to carry it out *by myself* (line 34).

Following this 'doubling down' by Rob, the device of using dramatic music while zooming in on a character's shocked facial expression is used once again, this time showing another Black character, Ego, with such an expression (lines 36–37). Ego's character also uses a similar repair-as-challenge practice to that previously deployed by Kenan's character, displaying similar shock in response to Rob's proposal. Specifically, she uses extreme case formulations to convey the extreme nature of his proposal, problematizing his stated intention to carry out his plan alone, at a particularly busy time, and to *buy up all* the sandwiches (lines 38 and 40–41) – and thus underscoring his extreme incompetence. Once again, Rob nonchalantly re-confirms his

plan (line 43), thereby continuing his portrayal as failing to register the basis of Ego's challenge, or even that she has challenged it at all, with the audience's laughter (line 44) showing their recognition and appreciation of Rob's multi-layered incompetence.

As the sketch continues, the specifically racial dimension of Rob's incompetence is made more explicit, as he displays a lack of understanding of the racialized location of the specific Popeye's restaurant that he reports planning on visiting (lines 47–48 and 53–54),<sup>5</sup> occasioning further displays of shock by both Kenan and Ego, accompanied by the now-familiar camera zoom and dramatic music (lines 49–50 and 55–56), separated by a further round of incredulous questioning by Kenan (line 51). The culmination of the portrayal of Rob's incompetence as primarily race-based, rather than arising first and foremost from his nationality, is produced through a twist in the form of portrayals of similar incompetence by two other characters, Melissa and Heidi, who readily endorse Rob's suggestion (lines 57 and 59). The categorial identities of these characters contrast with Rob's in that both are evidently portrayed as Americans, thus eliminating nationality – both Rob's and theirs – as an adequate account for their ignorance. This leaves race as the 'obvious' account (cf. Whitehead, 2009), highlighted by the recognition of the two Black characters (Kenan and Ego) of the shocking nature of Rob's suggestion, in contrast to the portrayed oblivion of all of the non-Black characters (Rob, Melissa and Heidi).<sup>6</sup>

Extract 3 shows an exchange from *Black-ish* featuring one of the show's main (Black)

---

<sup>5</sup> The street name and businesses he mentions here appear to be designed to invoke common sense knowledge of these as regular features of predominantly Black neighborhoods.

<sup>6</sup> As the sketch continues, Rob's displays of incompetence are generalized beyond race (while possibly still intersecting with race), including his statement of his intention to cut in line, and his willingness to yell at a hypothetical female cashier in the service of securing the sandwiches.



characters, Andre “Dre” Johnson, interacting with a (white) colleague, Josh, at the advertising company at which he works, with additional commentary provided by a narrator voiced by Andre’s character. Josh is initially (like the characters in Extracts 1 and 2) portrayed as incompetent with respect to knowledge of race-based entitlements in relation to his own actions, before subsequently also exhibiting deficient knowledge of how members of another racial category – specifically, Black people – might typically formulate a mundane action.

(3) *Black-ish*; Pilot

01	Jos:	Yo! Doctor DRE:E!
02	Nar:	This is Josh.
03		(.)
04	Dre:	Um,
05	Nar:	<u>Not</u> an honorary brother.
06	Dre:	Just Andre.
07	Jos:	Right, sorry <u>Andre</u> ? Hey bro, w- oh I mean <u>Andre</u> .
08		Listen, we’re workin’ on this Folger’s copy and
09		we wanted to know how you think °a Black guy°
10		would say (.) “good morning.”
11	Dre:	Hmm? ((scoffing)) Probably just like that.
12	Jos:	Cool, >cool cool cool.<

In greeting Andre (line 01), Josh addresses him using the name of Black rapper Dr. Dre, doing so with increased volume and stretching on the *e* sound evidently designed to portray his adoption of African American English (AAE). Immediately after this greeting, the narrator introduces Josh (line 02) before informing viewers that he is *Not an honorary brother* (line 05). This

conveys that Josh lacks the entitlement to use AAE in the way he has just done, with the emphasis on the word *Not* further underscoring the unequivocal nature of this lack of entitlement, and thus the incompetence in the design of Josh's greeting. Also noteworthy is Andre's initial hesitation following the greeting (line 04), which marks the dispreference (Pomerantz, 1984) of the otherwise blunt correction he issues at line 06. In addition to the marked departure from the preference for self-correction (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977) constituted by this utterance, Andre's failure to return Josh's greeting underscores his unequivocal disaffiliation from Josh (cf. Heritage, 1984a), thus further exposing the incompetence Josh has exhibited. Then, after registering Andre's correction, issuing an apology, and repeating Andre's full name with emphasis on the syllable he had omitted in his greeting, Josh immediately exhibits similar incompetence by addressing Andre with the informal term *bro* – which appears to be a further instance of his adoption of AAE – before initiating self-repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977) to instead use an emphasized repetition of Andre's name (line 07).

Josh then issues an inquiry (lines 07–10) that portrays the intersection of the type of incompetence in relation to his *own* actions that he has already displayed with further racial incompetence in relation to knowledge of the actions of *others*. With regard to the latter, this inquiry displays that he and the group on behalf of which he reveals he is making the inquiry (through his use of collective pronouns in lines 08 and 09) lack knowledge of Black men's ways of saying *good morning* (lines 9–10) – with this ignorance, as Andre's derisive response (line 11) conveys, involving not knowing that there is no characteristically 'Black' way of doing this. Josh's formulation of the inquiry also further portrays his incompetence in relation to race-based entitlements associated with his own actions, as his whispered reference to a hypothetical *Black*

*guy* (line 09) treats the simple mention of this compound category as a matter of diminished entitlement on his part (cf. Extract 1), while he concurrently fails to register any awareness of how the inquiry itself may implicate his racial incompetence.

In contrast to the incompetence Josh enacts in Extract 3 by incorrectly assuming a category-bound way of producing an action, a character in Extract 4 is portrayed as producing an action in a markedly category-bound way while failing to take into account its ill-fitted “recipient design” (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 727) for a recipient who is a member of a different racial category. In this case, from *Fresh off the Boat*, the Huangs, a Taiwanese-American family, are greeted by a group of women from their new neighborhood. During the course of the exchange, one of the women, Deidre, produces a highly personal report in a way portrayed as bound to the racial category (white) of which Deidre is evidently a member (cf. Rawls & Duck, 2020). Deidre also exhibits, throughout the exchange, various intersecting forms of racial incompetence that are similar to – but also extend – those seen in previous extracts. These include deficiencies in common-sense knowledge about the family’s racial category in relation to names, physical appearances, geographical origins and linguistic abilities, combined with a complete lack of self-awareness in relation to these deficiencies.

(4) *Fresh off the Boat*; S1, E1

- 01 Dei: >Hi I’m Diedre, this is Amanda, this is Samantha,  
02 this is Lisa, this is Carol Joan.<  
03 (.)  
04 Dei: Welcome?  
05 Jes: Thank you. I’m Jessica.  
06 Dei: ↑O:h::, I was expecting something a little more

07                    exotic, but I love the name Jessica. I had a

08                    sorority sister with that name, she died in a

09                    horrible riptide accident. .h ↑We ↓dedicated a

10                    section of the highway to her.

11                    (.) ((camera pans to Jessica's incredulous stare))

12    Dei:            ↑Anyway ↓where are you guys ↑fro:m?

13                    (0.2)

14    Edd:            My parents were born in Taiwa:n, (.) but my brothers

15                    and I were born in DC.

16    Dei:            ↑O::h::, <YOUR ENGLISH IS VERY GOOD!> uhuh huh huh!

17    Jes:            Are you all sister?

18    Wom:            UHUH HUH HUH HUH HUH HUH HUH!

19    Dei:            Anywhoo, ((continues, without answering Jessica's

20                    question))

From the outset of the interaction, the women are evidently portrayed as 'hyper-white:' They are all rollerblading, their outfits are matching or similar in style, they all adopt similar bodily comportment, and they all have blonde hair protruding from their helmets. The fast pace at which Deidre speaks as she introduces them, and the names of the women she lists (lines 01–02), may also be designed to be heard as bound to the compound category 'white woman.' These features thus establish a context in which the women's (and especially Deidre's) subsequent conduct can be understood as possibly similarly bound to this racial category, in contrast to that of the Huangs.

After Jessica speaks for the first time to introduce herself (line 05), Deidre is portrayed as hearing Jessica's name as surprising, as shown by the turn-initial "change of state" token, *Oh* (Heritage 1984b; also see Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006), along with her subsequent report of having expected *something a little more exotic* (lines 06–07). Deidre is thus portrayed as racially incompetent by virtue of failing to recognize that a person of Jessica's evident racial category might have a name like hers. Deidre's subsequent "touched-off" (Sacks, 1992, Vol. I, p. 761) report that she *had a sorority sister with that name* (lines 07–08) may be designed as tacitly treating the name Jessica as hearably white, thereby accounting for her portrayed surprise at Jessica's name, with this possibility resting on a common-sense assumption that Deidre's sorority was as white as her current companions.

Deidre then continues, building on the touched-off mention of her sorority sister by reporting her death (lines 08–09). Deidre's rapid transition from greetings and introductions to nonchalantly talking about the death of someone close to her appears designed to portray category-bound 'oversharing,' with the camera panning to Jessica's incredulous stare and her lack of any further response (line 11) conveying her treatment of it as such. In addition, her report of the death as arising from swimming in the ocean (an activity apparently portrayed as bound to the category 'white'), and of the group's subsequent naming of a section of highway in her memory (lines 09–10), seem to be designed to reinforce the race-based privilege and power Deidre and her social network are portrayed as enacting.

Deidre then shifts rapidly away from her discussion of the death and its aftermath, thereby further underscoring its nonchalant and poorly recipient-designed character, to launch a query about where the family is from (line 12). After Eddie (Jessica's son) speaks for the first time to answer her (lines 14–15), Deidre's response (line 16) further underscores her racial

incompetence, as she again displays surprise with a stretched turn-initial *Oh*, before complimenting Eddie on his good English. She is thereby portrayed as treating his racialized appearance as more salient to her expectations of his English-speaking ability than his just-previous report of his place of birth. This incompetence is also emphasized by the markedly raised volume and slow, careful enunciation of her talk as she speaks to Eddie, which – particularly when contrasted with the previous extremely fast pace of her talk, and despite having just shown her recognition of his competence as an English speaker – portrays her as condescendingly assuming he may have trouble understanding spoken English.

Jessica then remarks on the similar appearance of the group of women by asking if they are *all sister* (line 17), with this question further (although still tacitly) conveying to the audience their uniform appearance and conduct in terms of categories such as race, gender and class. The women's collective laughter in response (line 18), and Diedre's failure to subsequently answer the question (lines 19–20), portrays their treatment of the question as ridiculous, and thus their orientation to Jessica as an incompetent perceiver of the meaning of their similar appearance. This further conveys Diedre's own lack of awareness of her and the other women's own stereotypical white middle-class femininity, despite the inferences they have made about Jessica and Eddie's racialized appearance. They are thus portrayed as exhibiting the type of treatment of whiteness as 'invisible' that scholars building on Du Bois's work (e.g. Frankenberg, 1993; Hill, 2008; Lipsitz, 2006; also see Whitehead & Lerner, 2009) have described.

Our final case, Extract 5, shows further instances of a range of the types of racial incompetence evident in the previous extracts, combined with a portrayal of incompetence in relation to common-sense knowledge associated with accurately racially categorizing others, including intersecting knowledge of racial phenotypes, names and food preferences. This case is

from an episode of *Seinfeld* in which one of the show's main characters, Elaine, has been discreetly attempting to investigate the racial identity of her new boyfriend, Darryl. Having gathered inconclusive evidence based on his appearance, home decor and aspects of his conduct, Elaine has concluded that he is indeed Black after he attributed a couple staring at them to their status as a biracial couple. As the extract (showing a subsequent exchange in the diner involving Elaine, Darryl and an evidently Black waitress) unfolds, it is revealed that both Elaine and Darryl had erroneously racially categorized the other.

(5) *Seinfeld*; S9 E15

01    Wai:            °Here you go.°

02    Ela:            Long day?

03    Wai:            Yeah, I just worked a triple sh<sup>↑</sup>ift!

04    Ela:            pt I hear ya s<sub>i</sub>ster.

05                    (1.0) ((audience laughter))

06    Wai:            Sister?

07                    (0.2)

08    Ela:            Yeah.=hh It's okay, my boyfriend's Black, here he is, see?

09                    (0.5) ((audience laughter; waitress has skeptical

10                    expression))

11    Dar:            Hi Elaine.

12                    (0.5)

13    Ela:            °Hey.°

14                    (0.5) ((Waitress looks quizzically at Darryl;

15                    audience laughter))

16 Wai: He's Black?

17 Ela: Yeh.

18 (1.5) ((Daryll looks at Waitress, Elaine with surprise))

19 Dar: I'm Black?

20 (1.0) ((audience laughter))

21 Ela: Aren't you?

22 Wai: I'll give you a couple minutes to decide.

23 (2.0) ((audience laughter))

24 Dar: What are you talking about.

25 (0.2)

26 Ela: You're Bl↑a::ck, you said we were an interracial couple.

27 Dar: We are.

28 (0.2)

29 Dar: Because you're Hispanic.

30 (3.0) ((audience laughter, Elaine looks surprised))

32 Ela: I am?

33 Dar: Aren't you?

34 Ela: No::! Why would you think that?

35 Dar: Your name's Benes.

36 (0.2)

37 Dar: Your hair!

38 (0.2)

39 Dar: And you kept taking me to those Spanish restaurants.



40 (0.6) ((audience laughter))  
41 Ela: Huh! That's because I thought you were Black.  
42 (2.0) ((audience laughter, Darryll looks confused))  
43 Dar: ↑Why would you take me to a Spanish restaurant  
44 because I'm Black?  
45 (0.8) ((audience laughter, Elaine wincing))  
46 Ela: °I don't think we should be talking about this.°  
47 (1.2) ((audience laughter))  
48 Dar: So what are you?  
49 Ela: I'm white.  
50 Dar: So (0.2) we're just a (0.5) couple of white people?  
51 (1.2) ((audience laughter))  
52 Ela: I guess.  
53 (1.2) ((audience laughter))  
54 Dar: Huh=hhhhh  
55 Ela: Yeah.=hhh  
56 (1.5) ((audience laughter))  
57 Ela: So do you wanna go to The Gap?  
58 Dar: Sure! ((starts to grab coat and stand up;  
59 audience laughter))

In her interaction with the waitress prior to Darryl's arrival at the diner (lines 01–08), Elaine is portrayed as violating a race-based entitlement by using the Black-identified address term *sister* (line 04), with the waitress's delayed and questioning response (lines 05–06) signaling the

incompetence Elaine has displayed in doing this. In response, Elaine claims a proxy entitlement to use this term by virtue of Darryl's racial identity just as he arrives (line 08), with the audience's laughter and the waitress's skeptical facial expression marking the dubiousness of both this claim to entitlement and possibly also to Darryl's status as Black, thereby underscoring Elaine's racial incompetence.

The waitress then explicitly conveys the dubiousness of Darryl's claimed membership in the category 'Black' by questioning it directly (line 16), with both her presumed expertise at recognizing co-members of this category and the way in which she is portrayed as immediately recognizing Elaine's error serving as a competent contrast to the painstaking – but ultimately erroneous – efforts Elaine has made to accurately categorize him. Elaine's affirmative and unequivocal response (line 17) serves as the key moment at which Darryl is shown to become aware of how she has mis-categorized him, as conveyed in his surprised look at both the waitress and Elaine (line 18), and his similar questioning of Elaine's assertion (line 19). The waitress's ironic response (which treats their deliberation about Darryl's racial category as akin to deciding what to eat) and accompanying audience laughter (lines 22–23) then further underscore the exposure of Elaine's incompetence portrayed here.

Elaine's protestations (line 26) in the face of Darryl's questioning (line 24) following the waitress's departure then serve as a launching point for exposing Darryl as having similarly incompetently mis-categorized Elaine as Hispanic (lines 27 and 29), with his ensuing account of his reasoning for this categorization listing ambiguous evidence in relation to her name, hair and her repeatedly taking him to Spanish restaurants (lines 34, 36 and 38). Darryl is thereby portrayed as incompetent by virtue of using ambiguous evidence to arrive at an unequivocal – but erroneous – assumption of Elaine's racial category, thereby also solving the puzzle of why he

made the comment about them being a biracial couple that she had used as a basis for her own unequivocal assumption about his racial category.

Darryl's mention of Spanish restaurants is then used to further upgrade Elaine's portrayed racial incompetence, as she claims to have taken him to these restaurants because she thought he was Black (line 40). The nonsensical nature of this proposed category-food preference is conveyed in a number of ways in the ensuing moments, including Darryl's confused look and accompanying audience laughter (line 41), his subsequent direct questioning of her reasoning (lines 42–43), Elaine's pained look and further audience laughter (line 44), and her whispered acknowledgment of how being heard talking in this way may be discrediting for them (line 45), followed by another round of audience laughter (line 46).

The path out of the exchange is then begun by Darryl's direct question about Elaine's racial category (line 47), which is produced in a way possibly designed to parody a form of this question stereotypically associated with racially incompetent white people. Following Elaine's unequivocal self-identification as 'white' (line 48), and their reciprocal acknowledgment that they are, as Darryl puts it, *just a couple of white people* (lines 49 and 51), Darryl displays what appears to be designed as a mixture of mild surprise and disappointed resignation at this revelation (line 53), and Elaine aligns with this sentiment (line 54). This may be designed to link back to the proxy entitlement that Elaine claimed in addressing the waitress at the outset of the scene, and the similar social capital claimed by Darryl in his prior remarks on them being an interracial couple, with their displays of disappointment registering their loss of these ostensible benefits, and thereby further exposing the racial incompetence they had embraced in treating their relationship as a source of such benefits.

As a final punchline to the scene, Elaine invites Darryl to *The Gap* (line 56), with the turn-initial *So* in this invitation marking it as an upshot of the preceding exchange (Raymond, 2004), and thus treating the activity of going to this store as bound to the category ‘white.’ Darryl’s enthusiastic acceptance of this invitation (line 57) shows his alignment with this as an activity well-suited to their newly-discovered status as an all-white couple, and the closing of the exchange in this way underscores their unproblematic ability to return to life-as-white-people following the potentially embarrassing racial incompetence they have both exhibited.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As our analysis demonstrates, the writers and actors of exchanges such as these exploit common-sense knowledge about a wide range of features associated with particular racial categories – including category-bound actions and activities, and associated entitlements; foods, names and places; linguistic practices and abilities; interpersonal relationships; and observable (phenotypical) features – in order to portray instances of racial incompetence grounded in deficits with respect to such knowledge. Moreover, this incompetence can be underscored by the derisive or otherwise disaffiliative responses of characters on the receiving end of such displays. The writers thereby exploit ordinary structures and practices of interaction – most centrally in these cases relating to preference organization (Pomerantz, 1984; Heritage, 1984a) – to convey to viewers the unequivocal nature of the breaches that have been portrayed. In doing so, they produce tacit critiques of white racial incompetence and, by extension, of the nonchalant privilege and power that displays of such ignorance render visible (cf. Mueller, 2017, 2020).

For viewers who recognize these types of incompetence from their own real-world observations and experience, their portrayal in exaggerated or parodied ways can serve as a comedic device (cf. Okazawa, 2021, 2022; Stokoe, 2008), converting actions that might be

experienced as awkward or harmful in real-world settings into occasions for humor. In order to appreciate the humor in these exchanges, however, viewers must themselves be sufficiently competent to recognize the expectations being breached by characters portrayed as racially incompetent. These portrayals may thus function as cautionary tales for viewers who may have been unaware of their own incompetence, and thus of the ways in which people of color may routinely experience their everyday actions as exhibiting tacit or everyday racism (Essed, 1991; Rawls & Duck, 2020), even when they may be well-intentioned. That is, the exaggerated portrayals of characters' incompetence offer highly exposed and unequivocal indications of the problematic character of exchanges whose real-world realizations may be more equivocal or ambiguous. Also significant in this regard is the possibility for portraying openly disaffiliative responses of the recipients of instances of such incompetence, with fictional characters unencumbered by the constraints to which participants responding to real-world instances of possible racism are evidently systematically oriented (see e.g. Robles, 2015; Stokoe, 2015; Whitehead, 2015). These responses may thus further educate viewers on racial (in)competence, with the fictionalized, comedy-based format facilitating their learning in tacit, less direct and/or confrontational ways than are typically involved in everyday conversational or formal anti-racist educational interventions (cf. Scarpetta & Spagnolli, 2009; Whitehead, 2009; Whitehead & Wittig, 2004). In the process, however, they also serve to keep racial categories and associated common-sense knowledge in "good repair" (Heritage, 1984a, p. 210), with their use in this way thus serving as a mechanism for their reproduction as shared bases for competent action and inference, even if in designedly humorous and/or anti-racist ways.

Acknowledgements

Reports of portions of this chapter were presented at the 116<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in August 2021; and for the Conversation Analytic Working Group and the Race and Ethnicity Working Group at the University of California, Los Angeles in March 2023. We are grateful to the audiences of these presentations for their constructive feedback, and to Hansun Zhang Waring, Nadja Tadic and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions on earlier drafts of the chapter.

## References

- Du Bois, W.E.B. (2003 [1903]) *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York, NY: Signet Classic.
- Edwards, D. (2000) Extreme case formulations: Softeners, investment, and doing nonliteral. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 33 (4), 347–373.
- Essed, P. (1991) *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Frankenberg, R. (1993) *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Garfinkel, H. (1956) Some sociological concepts and methods for psychiatrists. *Psychiatric Research Reports* 6, 181–195.
- Garfinkel, H. (1963) A conception of, and experiments with, ‘trust’ as a condition of stable concerted actions. In O.J. Harvey (ed.) *Motivation and Social Interaction* (pp. 187–238). New York, NY: Ronald Press.
- Garfinkel, H. (1964) Studies of the routine grounds of everyday activities. *Social Problems* 11 (3), 225–250.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- Glenn, P. (2003) *Laughter in Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heritage, J. (1984a) *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Heritage, J. (1984b) A change of state token and aspects of its sequential placement. In J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds) *Structures of Social Action* (pp. 299–345). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hester, S. and Eglin, P. (1997) *Culture in Action: Studies in Membership Categorization Analysis*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Hill, J.H. (2008) *The Everyday Language of White Racism*. Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Jefferson, G. (2004) Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In G.H. Lerner (ed.) *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the First Generation* (pp. 13–23). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Joyce, J.B., Humă, B., Ristimäki, H.-L., Almeida, F.F.d. and Doehring, A. (2021) Speaking out against everyday sexism: Gender and epistemics in accusations of ‘mansplaining’. *Feminism & Psychology* 31 (4), 502–529.
- Kitzinger, C. (2005) Heteronormativity in action: Reproducing the heterosexual nuclear family in after hours medical calls. *Social Problems* 52 (4), 477–498.
- Lerner, G.H. (2013) On the place of hesitating in delicate formulations: A turn-constructive infrastructure for collaborative indiscretion. In J. Sidnell, M. Hayashi and G. Raymond (eds) *Conversational Repair and Human Understanding* (pp. 95–134). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lipsitz, G. (2006) *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

- Mueller, J.C. (2017) Producing colorblindness: Everyday mechanisms of White ignorance. *Social Problems* 64 (2), 219–238.
- Mueller, J.C. (2020) Racial ideology or racial ignorance? An alternative theory of racial cognition. *Sociological Theory* 38 (2), 142–169.
- Okazawa, R. (2021) Resisting categorization in interaction: Membership categorization analysis of sitcom humor. *Journal of Pragmatics* 186, 33–44.
- Okazawa, R. (2022) Membership categorization, humor, and moral order in sitcom interactions. *Discourse, Context & Media* 46, 1–8.
- Pomerantz, A. (1984) Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds) *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis* (pp. 57–101). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pomerantz, A. (1986) Extreme case formulations: A way of legitimizing claims. *Human Studies*, 9, 219–229.
- Potter, J. (2002) Two kinds of natural. *Discourse Studies* 4 (4), 539–542.
- Rawls, A.W. and Duck, W. (2020) *Tacit Racism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Raymond, C.W. (2019) Category accounts: Identity and normativity in sequences of action. *Language in Society* 49 (4), 585–606.
- Raymond, G. (2004) Prompting action: The stand-alone ‘so’ in ordinary conversation. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 37 (2), 185–218.
- Raymond, G. and Heritage, J. (2006) The epistemics of social relations: Owning grandchildren. *Language in Society* 35 (5), 677–705.



- Sacks, H. (1972a) An initial investigation of the usability of conversational data for doing sociology. In D.N. Sudnow (ed.) *Studies in Social Interaction* (pp. 31–74). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Sacks, H. (1972b) On the analyzability of stories by children. In J.J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (eds) *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication* (pp. 325–345). New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Sacks, H. (1984) Notes on methodology. In J.M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds) *Structures of Social Action* (pp. 21–27). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sacks, H. (1992) *Lectures on Conversation*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E.A. and Jefferson, G. (1974) A simplest systematics for the organization of turn taking in conversation. *Language* 50, 696–735.
- Scarpetta, F. and Spagnolli, A. (2009) The interactional context of humor in stand-up comedy. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 42 (3), 210–230.
- Schegloff, E.A. (1996) Confirming allusions: Toward an empirical account of action. *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (1), 161–216.
- Schegloff, E.A. (1997) Practices and actions: Boundary cases of other-initiated repair. *Discourse Processes* 23 (3), 499–545.
- Schegloff, E.A. (2007) A tutorial on membership categorization. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39 (3), 462–482.
- Schegloff, E.A., Jefferson, G. and Sacks, H. (1977) The preference for self-correction in the organization of repair in conversation. *Language* 53 (2), 361–382.
- Speer, S.A. (2002) ‘Natural’ and ‘contrived’ data: A sustainable distinction? *Discourse Studies* 4 (4), 511–525.

- Stokoe, E. (2008) Dispreferred actions and other interactional breaches as devices for occasioning audience laughter in television 'sitcoms'. *Social Semiotics* 18 (3), 289–307.
- Whitehead, K.A. (2009) 'Categorizing the categorizer': The management of racial common sense in interaction. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 72 (4), 325–342.
- Whitehead, K.A. (2015) Everyday antiracism in action: Preference organization in responses to racism. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 34 (4), 374–389.
- Whitehead, K.A. (2020) The problem of context in the analysis of talk-in-interaction: The case of implicit whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 83 (3), 294–313.
- Whitehead, K.A. and Lerner, G.H. (2009) When are persons 'white'? On some practical asymmetries of racial reference in talk-in-interaction. *Discourse and Society* 20 (5), 613–641.
- Whitehead, K.A. and Wittig, M.A. (2004) Discursive management of resistance to a multicultural education programme. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 1, 267–284.
- Wilkinson, S. and Kitzinger, C. (2006) Surprise as an interactional achievement: Reaction tokens in conversation. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 69 (2), 150–182.