Contesting racist talk in families: Strategies used, and effects on family practices and social change

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Differences of opinion between family members are familiar narratives for many people. When family tensions involve racist talk, how do family members navigate this? This paper asks: (1) What strategies do family members use to challenge racist talk within their own family?; and (2) What effects do these strategies have on (a) ongoing racist talk, (b) family practices, and (c) broader social change around racism? In Australia, where this project was based, anti-racism campaigns often advocate for individual contestations of racism, but their effects on the structures of racism are not well known. This paper identifies four strategies used to challenge racist talk in families including (1) undertaking safe critique, (2) humour, (3) direct confrontation or violence, and (4) reference to personal / familial experiences of racism. I found that individual contestations of racist talk within families may, at times, shift family practices (Morgan, 2011) away from expressions of racism, or further the development of race literacy amongst *some* family members. However, this was very much a minority response to individual contestations of racist talk. To create social change, this paper highlights the critical need for activity that much more broadly seeks to dismantle racist structures and institutionalised racism.

1. Introduction: Responding to Racist Talk in Australian Families

> *You are out for a family meal at a Chinese restaurant and one of your relatives is loudly disgusted at the food.*
>
> *In a text chat your brother says that people seeking asylum in Australia will probably abuse Australian children.*
>
> *Your parents argue that Muslim immigration should be limited to avoid Islamic terrorism happening in Australia.*

These are three scenarios my participants found themselves in. When a family member says something we consider racist, what do we do? And, what follows from our responses? Differences of opinion between family members are familiar narratives for many people. When family tensions involve racist talk, how do family members navigate this? This paper poses the following questions: (1) What strategies do family members use to challenge racist talk within their own family?; and (2) What effects do these strategies have on (a) ongoing racist talk, (b) family practices and (c) broader social change around racism?

Racism in Australia is foundational, used to justify the invasion and dispossession of Aboriginal groups across the country. Put another way, racism is structural and institutionalised, deeply embedded within Australian social, cultural and political life (see, for example, Abdel-Fattah, 2018; Blair et al., 2017; Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016). There is strong interest in Australia and beyond in what individuals should do in response to racism. *Racism It Stops With Me* is the most recent anti-racism campaign by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2012). The *Give Nothing to Racism* campaign asks New Zealanders to "refuse to spread intolerance" (New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2017). Both of these approaches centre individual responses as critical to challenging racism. Given that racism is systemic and institutional, what are the effects of individual responses to racism, like those encouraged by these Human Rights Commissions? There is an assumption that individual action can undermine systemic racism, but we know too little about the relationship between individual contestations and the structures of racism. As Picca and Feagin (2007) argue, most analyses of racism focus either on the "big societal structures of racism or the individual prejudice in white heads. Yet the small scale everyday networks… are very important" (p. 13). Racism is performed,

reproduced, and transmitted through everyday interactions between families and friends (see [reference withheld for peer review] for a more detailed conceptual discussion of racist talk in families).

If individual responses are a key strategy to address racism, it is critical to understand their effects. The literature on bystander anti-racism (e.g. Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008; Nelson et al., 2011; Redmond et al., 2014) explores responses to racism by those who witness racist talk or behaviour. This literature is largely focused on racism in public or quasi-public spaces (Nelson, 2020). Responses to racism within private spaces, amongst family and friends, have received relatively less attention in the anti-racism literature. This paper explores what happens when the racism that we encounter is within our own families. This includes reflection on the extent to which responses to racist talk in families might be transformative, or produce social change (Butler, 1997; Pedwell, 2017).

2. Family Practices and Racist Talk

To situate racist talk within families, I reflect first on sociological understandings of families. Morgan (1996; 2011) posited that family should be understood as a set of practices, rather than a structure within which certain individuals belong. Families are produced by a set of activities with particular meanings. Families are fluid, rather than static. Nelson (2020) argued that some family practices, particularly for White families, accommodate and reproduce racism, even when racist talk is contested.

Family is a problematic concept and there has been considerable debate across a number of disciplines about the language of family (Wilkinson & Bell, 2012). Alternatives such as personal life or intimacy (Gilding, 2010; Smart, 2007), or the 'social person' or relational individual (McCarthy, 2012), have been proposed but it is difficult to capture the precise care relationships involved in families without using the term. In this paper I refer to families with the understanding that the concept of family has historically privileged white, heterosexual, middle class families (Morgan, 2011).

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There is little research that directly examines expressions of racism within families. One notable body of literature relates to interracial relationships. Families that encompass interracial relationships are increasingly common. In Australia, for example, 30 per cent of cohabiting partners have different ancestries (Khoo, 2011). In a study of Black-White intimate (gay and straight) relationships Steinbugler (2012) looked at the ways racial hierarchies are reproduced within these partnerships. In line with the understanding of racism presented in this paper, Steinbugler (2012) understands racism as a social system. This is important because if racism is understood as racial *prejudice* "then intimacy seems to be a way to neutralize racial differences" (p.xvii). Steinbugler complicates the assumption that interracial relationships naturally resolve racial differences, a central tenant of psychology's contact theory (Allport, 1954/1979). If racism is a social system, we need to ask difficult questions about the significance of intimate relationships, such as how Black and White partners navigate differentials in racial power and privilege? Can interracial relationships have a positive effect on broader interracial dynamics? Steinbugler (2012) is relatively pessimistic about these possibilities, though she does identify a small proportion of participants who have developed a strong critical race literacy (Twine, 1999) as a result of their experience as an interracial partner. The idea of racial literacy originally comes from Twine's (1999) research with White mothers and their children of African descent, and referred to the "parental labour" undertaken to equip children with a positive Black identity (Twine, 2004: 878). Here, my interest extends beyond families with interracial relationships. I too am interested in the degree to which racial literary can be developed within families of varied racial makeup.

3. Raced, Classed and Gendered Responses to Racist Talk in Families

Negotiations of racist talk in families bring other familial features to the fore. This section outlines the ways that race, class and gender intersect with, and are implicated in, negotiations of racist talk in families.

Picca and Feagin's (2007) *Two-faced Racism* was instructive for the current research. They draw on Goffman (1959) to articulate a front-stage and back-stage on which race related conversation and interactions occur. The frontstage is multiracial; Whites exercise much

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caution in this setting, particularly when engaging in race related talk. In contrast, the backstage is all White. There is a degree of comfort associated with racial talk on the backstage and an assumption of safety; that one's views will be tolerated, if not shared. The backstage is where everyday racism is learned and performed, and where Whites prepare for multiracial interactions.

On the backstage the function of racial comments is to create bonds with others, to integrate the group. Elsewhere I have argued that it is not only the race of those present that is significant, but the relationships between protagonists that determines whether individuals are operating on the front or back-stage (reference withheld for peer review). In some cases family members assume they are acting on the backstage, with a degree of comfort around race related talk and an assumption of shared values. When a contestation of racist talk occurs, this can propel actors (family members) onto the frontstage, illustrating a disjunction between what different family members consider acceptable racial conversation or behaviour. The edges, the boundaries and the slippages between the frontstage and backstage are important foci of analysis (Picca & Feagin, 2007).

When racism is named or contested, the way that we respond is racialised. Yancy (2018) describes the violent, racist *Backlash* he received after publishing a piece in the New York Times, asking White Americans to reflect on their (role in) racism. He reveals White defensiveness around, in particular, the suggestion that Whites are in any way implicated in structures of racism and privilege.. DiAngelo (2018) identifies White Fragility as an important feature of the White racial framing of society. White Fragility captures the way White people consider "a challenge to [their] racial worldviews as a challenge to [their] identities as good, moral people" (p.2). White Fragility describes White defensiveness around conversations about racism and privilege. For People of Colour, lived experiences of racism may inform responses.

The implications of class for contestations of racist talk in families are complex. The way racism is expressed through talk is related to class and education, and this can lead to an overemphasis on working class racism (Andersen, 2003) at the expense of recognising

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structural racism. Nonetheless, class and educational differences within families create disjunctions in the acceptability of racist talk within families. While more middle class family members may object to overtly racist talk, Pedwell (2017) raises doubts about the effectiveness of middle class liberal mindedness in producing social change.

How are responses to racist talk likely to be gendered? Gender role prescriptions were a "prominent enforcer of silence" (p.10) in diaries of racist incidents collected by Hyers (2007). The reasons women provided for not responding to racist talk were avoiding conflict (37%) and impression management (13%). Racist performances are more likely to be by White men, with White women playing the roles, in line with gendered expectations, either of supporting or policing the racism (Picca & Feagin, 2007). So White women are *both* more likely to passively support racism but also do the 'social policing' of racist performances.

Sara Ahmed (2017) coined the term 'feminist killjoy' to capture precisely this notion of "the feminist policer" (p.2). When women expose or name something as sexist or racist, they become the problem. Ahmed (2017: 38) locates her first experiences of bringing up racism and sexism around the table with family.

> However she speaks, the one who speaks as a feminist is usually heard as the cause of the argument. She stops the smooth flow of communication. It becomes tense... She is doing more than saying the wrong thing: she is getting in the way of something, the achievement or accomplishment of the family or of some we or another, which is created by what is not said.

The labour of ensuring the family gathering is a happy occasion is often taken on by women, and if they are not willing or able to carry out this labour, they become a problem.

4. Racist Talk in Families and Social Transformation

The second research question posed relates to the effects of responses to racist talk, including the possibility of social transformation. Butler's work on performativity (e.g. Butler, 1997) suggests that contestations of racist speech, also speech acts, have the power to be transformative, to subvert or interrupt racist speech. Ahmed (2004) argues that anti-

racism, equally, can be *not* performative, suggesting that identifying White privilege and racism are in themselves not anti-racist actions. Individual or institutional speech that identifies racism does not necessarily "commit a state, institution or person to a form of action we could describe as anti-racist" (p.12). Performativity is about repetitive or citational practices that reproduce and potentially subvert discourse. Under this framework performativity is the "reiteration of norms, which precede, constrain and exceed the performer" (Butler, 1993: 234). Performativity theories go beyond the culpability of individuals, seeking recognition that racist talk cannot "function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force" (Butler, 1997: 51). Fortier (1999) sees citationality as primary in Butler's performativity arguing "that it is 'through the invocation of convention' that 'acts' derive their binding power" (citing Butler, 1993). Within the raced, gendered and classed relationships within families, family dynamics and histories also become primary.

The complexity of social transformation and the role of *habit* in social change was an interest of Pedwell (2017), and has utility here. Pedwell (2017: 93) explored habit as a tool for understanding social transformation, observing that it is

> habit's double nature – its enabling of both compulsive repetition and creative becoming – that makes it a rich concept for addressing the propensity of harmful socio-political patterns to persist in the face of efforts to generate greater awareness of their damaging effects, as well as the material forms of automation and coordination on which meaningful societal transformation may depend.

Habit has been most strongly associated with mindless repetition, and therefore assumed to be anti-progressive. Pedwell (2017) questions the emphasis on empathy as an agent of social change – raising doubts as to whether strategies focused on developing empathy result in "sustained transformation at a deep embodied, material and structural level?" (p.97). She compares empathy to potentials of habit. Attending to habit reveals the automated processes which underlie persistent oppression and inequality, but also reveals the, perhaps counterintuitive, "role of automation and habituation in enabling more enduring forms of socio-political transformation" (p.115). The analysis presented below explores the connections between habit and contestations.

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5. Method for Gathering Stories of Racist Talk in Families

This paper draws on 14 interviews with participants in Sydney, Australia[1]. Interviews were conducted in late 2015 and early 2017. Participants were aged from their mid-20s to late-60s; 10 were female and four were male. Nine participants were White Australians and five identified as Aboriginal or Australian with South Asian, East Asian or Middle Eastern heritage. Seven participants were the only members of their families to take part in this research. For the remaining seven, multiple family members (parent and adult child; parent and adult child + adult child's partner; two partners) participated (in separate interviews) in order to allow for multiple perspectives within a family.

These interviews gathered information about how family members navigated racist talk in their families. I sought to interview a diversity of participants to gather a breadth of experiences, rather than seeking out a representative group, and I used a purposive recruitment strategy of individuals within my personal network. One of the limitations of this recruitment strategy was the interviewees were generally younger, more middle class and more highly educated than the broader population. This limits the degree to which I can claim that individuals who do not fall within this demographic group use these strategies to respond to racism. However, this participant group provided insight into the roles that middle class family members play in regard to racist talk within their not always middle class extended families.

The author conducted the interviews and is a White Australian. Undertaking the interviews as a White Australian, who experiences White privilege in Australia and is a beneficiary rather than a target of racism is important context for the analysis that follows. This meant that I did not share experiences of being targeted by racism when interviewing People of Colour. When interviewing White participants, we had shared experience of racial privilege.

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[1] Ethics approval (ETH19-3643) was received from the University of Technology Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee.

6. Strategies Used to Contest Racist Talk Within Families

This section identifies four strategies participants used to contest racist talk within their families, in response to the first research question. These strategies are not an exhaustive list of responses to racist talk (see Nelson et al., 2011), however they offer insight into responses to racist talk within family settings, where managing relationships is a primary concern. It is important to note that not everything considered problematic was challenged; participants reflected on both contestations as well as more acquiescent responses.

Safe critique/clarification of misinformation

Emmanuel, a White man in his early 40s, referred to 'safe critique' as parts of an argument that he could easily undermine or prove inaccurate, and used this strategy most commonly with his mother and sister, who he was very close to. Jennifer was in her mid 20s and identified as White. She had grown up in a large family with four siblings, one of whom, her brother, she now had heated disagreements with. She learned that presenting her brother with facts that directly challenged his thinking was most effective in prompting him to reconsider his views. Pania, a 30-year-old woman with South Asian heritage, reported using counter examples to undermine her mother's racial stereotyping.

> *… my desire is not to engage in that discussion at all and what I typically do is engage in safe critique. So critique which will involve perhaps easy wins… pick a part of the argument which is… easily provable as false, highlight that to kind of - as a way of undermining the argument. So I say, have a look at this part of the argument. Clearly that's not true. I leave it there with the assumption that that might call into question other parts of that particular argument.* [Emmanuel]

> *…I think that maybe it is those actual facts that I can present that directly challenge what he's saying, that might actually change his opinions. Cause also like he's very intelligent so I think when you do actually give him substantial proof he's kind of like, oh shit, yep all right, I can see where you're coming from now, yeah, you are right. Whereas… banter between the two of us like that, it doesn't really solve anything…* [Jennifer]

Yeah, actually, me and my brother as well we actually always challenge my mum… she just kind of makes these really broad generalisations so it's quite easy to kind of say like well – to just be like you can't say that about everyone in that group of people or whatever. Or what about like you know, x friend that you've got. They're not like that, how can you make that kind of generalization? [Pania]

Pointing out inaccuracies was seen as the most effective way of contesting racial stereotypes and misinformation, while maintaining familial relationships. In almost all cases, participants were thoughtful about how they contested racist talk within these relationships of care. Emmanuel and Jennifer were operating within mostly White families, and the safe critique they engaged in avoids pointing out the role of Whites in racism (Yancy, 2018); it navigates around White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). Pania describes what she sees as problematic talk by her mother, a woman of colour, but this interaction occurs within a racialized hierarchy where women of colour are systematically marginalised. Certain types of information are considered more persuasive than others, including flaws in logic (Emmanuel), facts about asylum seekers (Jennifer), and counter stereotypes (Pania). 'Safe critique' interrupts racist speech (Butler, 1997). Section 7 explores how thoroughly these types of interventions undermine racism.

Pania describes what could be a deeper intervention in her mother's racial thinking.

…if she kind of makes an offhand comment about like substance abuse in Aboriginal communities to kind of like correct that… I'll be like a lot of the issues that you're seeing as being problems are actually a result of invasion, genocide, dispossession, all of these things have a massive - like this intergenerational trauma etc. And she does get that… this is what's so weird for me is that she does empathise with – with that, with colonialism and stuff. Like she actually understands how what impact that has… so I can have a conversation with her about that and she'll agree and she'll like you know – she won't say that kind of stuff around me anymore but I don't know how much of that actually gets through. [Pania]

Pania reflected on an educative conversation about the ongoing effects of trauma on Aboriginal communities in Australia. She was unsure whether these conversations

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undermined the stereotypes held by her mother. Here, and elsewhere in our interview, Pania is highly motivated to contest her mother's problematic comments. For many people of colour, racially mixed families contesting racism is intensely close and personal. In contrast, for *some* White family members racism is at a remove, more theoretical than personal. This can mean that some White families, at times unwittingly, reproduce structural racism or allow for its continuation within their family (Nelson, 2020).

Sarcasm and jokes: Responding in kind

Three participants discussed using humour or jokes to respond to racist talk. Jian, a man with Chinese Malaysian heritage in his mid-30s, said that if he felt a comment was racist, he sometimes tried a comeback "with a little bit of a comedic element to it". Jennifer, introduced above, did not feel comfortable enough with her partner's grandparents to directly challenge them, but she was able to use humour.

> *...when Steve's grandfather made a racist comment about Asians I did kind of just turn it into a joke but I think as well the fact that I said, oh you're going to have a Cambodian great grandchild... I think maybe like I could see that kind of ticking away, and thinking, would I be thinking that if this was a family member? But I don't know.* [Jennifer]

Humour was used to reflect the manner in which racist talk was expressed. A white woman in her mid 30s, Felicity, reflected on the difficulty of responding when problematic comments are made in a joking way. Serious responses would be ineffective, being dismissed as her having no sense of humour, as Ahmed (2017) also observed. Ignoring problematic comments was equally unsatisfactory for her, as she felt a moral obligation to respond. In interactions with her father, Felicity mirrors the tone of her father's racist talk, returning his sarcasm in her contestations.

> *I think he makes those comments in a joking way both to rile me up but also as a way to – I think it's really passive aggressive because I respond and attack him for it, which I'm happy to do, I'm an arsehole because I have no sense of humour but if I ignore it then I'm kind of complicit and so it – the way that he does it I don't think that he realises is quite insidious but it kind of renders the conversation moot*

because there's nowhere to go. So that's hard. And I just deal with that now by having equally kind of sarcastic comments in return, rather than being too serious myself. [Felicity]

In line with Picca and Feagin's (2007) observation that racist performances on the backstage were disproportionately by White men, these examples both involve older White men. White women took on the role of 'social policing' the racist performances of White men. Felicity is a 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2017) in the interactions she describes with her father, she is not willing to let her father's problematic comments go uncontested in the service of family togetherness. Guerin (2003) argued that a function of racist talk can be to maintain social relationships, and being politically incorrect can come with a certain status, in line with assertive or patriarchical masculinity (Picca and Feagin, 2007). This is not to say racist talk aimed at shocking or entertaining is not pernicious (Billig, 2001; Weaver, 2011), but Guerin (2003) argues that the function of racist talk informs the type of response that will be most effective. In another part of our interview Felicity observed that her father's racist comments were almost an attempt to relate to his daughter, who strongly identifies as anti-racist and feminist. The racist or sexist 'jokes' Felicity's father makes, and her contestations form a family practice of racist – anti-racist banter (Morgan, 2011; Nelson, 2020). In this way, rather than being transformational, productive of social change, this banter become a habitual performance of family (Pedwell, 2017). Section 7 further considers the anti-racist potentials of these performances.

Direct confrontation / Violence

Very direct confrontations around racist talk were unusual. Two participants, however, talked about direct confrontations, including violence in one case. Emmanuel was generally very reticent to confront family members. On this occasion he was compelled to directly intervene during an incident involving his brother-in-law.

so I guess the point at which this softly softly approach becomes untenable is when there are external players involved... we went to [a Chinese restaurant] with my sister and her husband who holds extremely racist views about people... they brought around chicken's feet and he stood up and pointed at them and just... like started this

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rant about chicken's feet and we got into a kind of huge kerfuffle - a huge argument about it. At one point I said I was going to call the police on him - I don't know why, I don't know what that was going to do but I mean it - it kind of shows how agitated I was at the incident. And the reason that that bubbled over was because there were people there, external people, so there was the Chinese people serving us the food who were now part of this relationship and I couldn't - I couldn't have them be insulted in that way. My desire to kind of intervene in that moment was - you know - the desire to not confront my family was kind of butted up against my desire to intervene in this situation and in that particular case, you know, I basically told him to leave the restaurant and he did leave the restaurant... [Emmanuel]

This confrontation was brought about by the direct impact of racist talk and behaviour on restaurant staff, and perhaps other patrons. This event has since become an anecdote in the repertoire of family jokes, however Emmanuel considers everyone understood it to be an event with serious implications. Emmanuel's brother-in-law no longer goes to Chinese restaurants with the family. Emmanuel tolerates racism on the backstage, or goes softly softly, but not on the multiracial frontstage where there are individuals who are directly harmed by it (Picca & Feagin, 2007). By intervening in public spaces, Emmanuel differentiates himself as a 'good', 'anti-racist' White person, in contrast to his brother-in-law. Yet racism in tolerated in private spaces. In this way, Emmanuel's intervention, or speech against racism, may be non-performative (Ahmed, 2004), it is not transformative or productive of social change.

Tim was a White man in his late 40s from a "low middle class" family. He described a history of "physical bullying", or violence, from his brother and father. In the following passage, Tim's brother and father use offensive language in relation to Aboriginal Australians, itself a form of violence, both towards Aboriginal communities and Tim himself. At the time Tim was working closely with an Aboriginal community in regional NSW.

And we had a big kind of confrontation one Christmas when my brother and my dad were kind of having a go at me and having a go at... in their words, boms, for

being lazy and all this kind of stuff and it kind of got physical… I think it just got to a point where I was kind of tired and I just lashed out and kind of hit my brother in the face and he went into hospital and my dad came in and I just was about to hit him and I think the tables kind of turned in a way… it was kind of the start of something [voice shaking and upset]. But it was over racial kind of stuff. So it was an ugly kind of situation, like really ugly, but when you've been brought up in a violent household it sounds a lot – like it's still bad, cause you live your life in quite a lot of fear to a certain extent and it gets in in lots of different ways around trust and all those different things… but I think that in a way it did make stuff go away. Like at least the kind of performance of racism wasn't as ok because they were fearful of – in a sense of what am I going to lead to? You couldn't say violence doesn't solve anything because that's not quite true either.

Tim sees this violent contestation as a significant moment in his relationship with his brother and father. Racist talk occurs here in a context within which family dynamics and histories are primary. We must read expressions of racism and Tim's contestation within the context of violence within the family. Butler (1997) observed that racist talk cannot "function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force" (p.51). This is an essential part of studying racist talk within the context of the relationships within which they occur. Racist talk cannot be extricated from family relationships. Significantly, the act that Tim describes as powerful, as having the capacity of alter the trajectory of family practices (Morgan, 2011), was not only a speech act. Tim's response to racist speech within his family was both material, an act of violence, and also a speech act, the threat of violence towards his father.

Citationality is working here on two levels. The word 'bom', a derogatory term used to refer to Aboriginal Australians, is powerful because of the institutional structures of racism and the prior use of this term. The acts, both the material (bodily) and the speech acts, are also citational of family practices and histories (Butler, 1997) – of violence, of attempts to demean and control. The violence inflicted on his brother and the threat of violence made towards his father did, in Tim's view, interrupt or subvert the possibilities of future racist

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speech, as Butler (1997) argued was possible. An important caveat here would be that future racist speech became unacceptable in Tim's presence. The extent to which this moment of contestation would constrain racist speech in other contexts is unknown.

Gender and class feature strongly in both of these cases. Tim and Emmanuel are White men from working class or lower middle class families; both have been mobile in terms of their own class status. For Emmanuel, this mobility creates a disjunction between him and his less mobile family. Emmanuel performs a gendered protectiveness of the Chinese restaurant staff. The confrontation between Tim and his brother and father happens in the private space of the home – the home as a space for Tim is replete with troubling histories of violence and control. Within the masculine relationships in this space – between father and son; between brothers – conflict and violence are intermingled.

Reference to personal experiences and impacts of racism

Participants who were not White raised personal experiences of racism during our interview, or experiences of their families or communities. For Pania and Quinn these experiences meant that their family members were highly motivated not to perpetrate racism themselves. Pania used this to challenge her mum's use of racial stereotypes.

> *…Sometimes I'll say like how would you like it if someone made that kind of generalization about Bengalis right? And then she'll be like, oh ok, and then she doesn't kind of say anymore. So that kind of works.* [Pania]

Quinn, an Aboriginal man in his mid-thirties, discussed the profound experiences of racism that his parents and wider family had experienced. He drew on this experiential knowledge of racism in conversations with his parents.

> *…they say things nowadays that I feel are informed by media so like fear of terrorism and stuff like that… I try to tell them that they should understand that this is – because to me it's about putting yourself in someone else's shoes and they've always told me about the racism that they experienced as Aboriginal people – like my parents and their parents – and so you know, they used to always try to relay that to me with other cultures as well, like Asian cultures. But I feel now I have to remind them when they*

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say remarks about Islamic cultures as well in Australia or asylum seekers and that kind of thing... I just feel like occasionally I have to point out their racism to them. There's never any arguments or anything. [Quinn]

Participants who are not White made reference to personal experiences of racism as a strategy to contest racist talk in their families. This was not part of the repertoire of responses for White participants. Experiential knowledge of racism was generally associated with a strong awareness of what is at stake in contesting racist talk. We can interpret Pania and Quinn's reference to personal and familial experiences of racism within a family practices (Morgan, 2011) framework. I suggest that for many Aboriginal and Muslim families in Australia, negotiating experiences of racism is itself a family practice; it has necessarily become part of the way family is practiced.

7. Effects of Contestations: Family Practices and Ongoing Racist Talk

The second research question concerned the effects of contestations on both family practices and ongoing racist talk/behaviour. The more macro interest here is in how individual responses relate to the structures of racism. Do interventions in racist talk lead to broader anti-racist change?

Generate discomfort: "it's a real barbeque stopper"

One of the most common effects of contesting racist talk was discomfort. Nicola, a White woman in her mid 40s, avoided conversations about race with her father. She was uncomfortable with the class and educational differences that such conversations illuminated. Nicola was from a regional country town in New South Wales, from a lower middle-class family. She had left home at 19 and gone to university, eventually completing a PhD. Her class mobility meant that Nicola felt contestations made her father feel "out of his league".

... say the Northern Territory intervention[2]... he saw that as a positive, you know, people were finally getting some help in their difficult communities. And I remember a conversation about that and I just sort of tried to sort of steer it by kind of saying, oh I don't know, look you know maybe. But it kind of pushed a bit and I finally said, look dad you're a good Catholic, there are priests abusing children everywhere why do we not intervene in that situation?... I think in that situation he'd never express anger or anything like that, he'd pretend to agree with you. But you'd know that it had generated discomfort... then [you] live with a little bit of discomfort for – look it can be a couple of days actually because – and not in any ways explicit. But dad likes to be thought of as a good man and so if you've disagreed with him it's a judgment that he feels uncomfortable with. [Laughs]. So he'll go [laughs] and garden rather too eagerly and pull out a pile of plants rather than weeds. [Nicola]

Discomfort is *both* an impediment to 'speaking racism' (Nelson, 2015b) and an effect of such a contestation. Nicola avoided these types of contestations because they brought class differences to the forefront and generated discomfort within important family relationships. We see the operation of White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) in Nicola's father wanting "to be thought of as a good man". There was a bodily discomfort in Nicola's father following a contestation, an energy expended through gardening. As I will return to, at another point Nicola reflected that these contestations did not change her father's views. Intervention, in this case, may have led to Nicola's father being more cautious around racial talk, but, by Nicola's account, did not lead to habit reformation, or social transformation (Pedwell, 2017).

Discomfort was generated both for those contesting racist talk and the family member who was challenged. Like Nicola, Quinn observed that his responses to racist talk felt very much a 'classed' form of response in his family, and were ineffective for this reason. Quinn was

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[2] Refers to the Northern Territory Emergency Response of June 2007, where the Australian Government suspended the Racial Discrimination Act in order to intervene in remote Aboriginal communities without warning or consultation.

an Aboriginal man in his late 30s, brought up in Western Sydney, having completed tertiary education and working in a professional role. As discussed earlier, on occasion Quinn felt comments made by his parents were racist. When asked how they respond to this, Quinn says

> *There's just silence. [Laughs]. Um, yeah, it's a real – to use a term that I learnt last week that apparently is something that John Howard coined, a barbeque stopper. Like it's a barbeque stopper. Like it's something where someone might say something you know rah rah rah and then someone else will say hey you can't say that and then that's the end of it. And then nothing else happens.*

A bit later, in reference to his family's response to something he called racist, I asked whether that would mean his parents would not bring it up again.

> [Laughs] *Maybe… I do also think there's also just a little bit of like elitism as well… like there's a bit of middle classness about sort of – like if someone says something really ignorant and then you just kind of shove your intellect down their throat about why they're so wrong, even that is like – you're not necessarily going to change their point of view… like an act of something racist doesn't necessarily – that's not your opportunity to address it I don't think necessarily…*

Again, educational differences come to the fore in these discussions. Quinn describes 'educating' his family, who routinely *experience* racism, about racism as shoving his intellect down their throat. Some of the discomfort generated in this instance relates to the fact that contestations are occurring in what is *not* a homogeneous class setting, across class lines. Nicola and Quinn are hyperaware of the possibility of exerting class oppression over their parents. Quinn's reflections echo the doubts that Pedwell (2017) raised around liberal mindedness as an effective strategy for social change. These examples highlight the difficulties of navigating racist talk without perpetuating classist assumptions, under which racism becomes 'ignorance'.

Given discomfort is both an *effect* and a barrier for contesting racist talk in families, what is the broader significance of discomfort? These examples highlight that it is worth thinking through the productiveness of discomfort. Quinn says that in his family, if he told his

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parents what they were saying was racist, the conversation would stop, "and then nothing else happens". So discomfort may shut down discussion, or generate defensiveness. These reports also prompt contemplation of what might be productive discomfort. Producing discomfort is inextricably, if unwittingly, part of being a feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2017). Ahmed refers to the expectation that the 'success' and togetherness of family gatherings should not be undermined by those pointing out racism or sexism. In this view, discomfort is not produced by the racism or sexism that occurs, but rather the pointing out of racism or sexism that otherwise would be allowed to be. How and when does discomfort lead to change? If simply promoting liberal mindedness is not enough to achieve social change, could there by some value in discomfort as a prompt to shift habits (Pedwell, 2017)? These are important, big questions to be considered further in the next iteration of this research project.

Racist talk curbed/constrained within limited or specific context

Some participants (e.g. Jennifer, Sera, Pania) reported that their contestations led to family members being more cautious in their presence. However, they were pessimistic about the possibility that their contestations of problematic speech had any wider influence.

> *And there's been a few times where [my in-laws] have started to have conversations like that and I've said something like that and the conversation's just shut down. And none of them had anything to say about it. But I think as well like I haven't changed their opinions, they've just learnt not to say things like that around me. 'Cause there have been times when I've overheard them having conversations about things but I haven't been in the room.* [Jennifer]

Sera was in her early 30s. She migrated to Australia from Lebanon with her parents as a toddler. Her parents were Catholic and had lived in Lebanon through the civil war. As a result of this history, they had strong views about Muslim and Jewish people. Sera reflected on whether her contestations of these views have had an impact.

> *I feel like probably that they don't kind of stereotype as much. I don't know if that's because they just don't do it around me, um, they - Dad will still say stuff about Muslims and Jewish people because obviously they have all these issues with Israel*

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and stuff in Lebanon. Um, and like if I kind of try to bring it up it will turn into an argument so I usually just don't argue with him about those things. And he kind of knows as well that like it'll lead to an argument so he's stopped saying it as much. And same with Mum… [Sera]

Sera goes on to provide an example of her parents asking, 'well what do you expect?', in relation to the poor behaviour of a Muslim family friend. This leads her to conclude, "I don't think that's [stereotyping] really gone away". Pania was similarly skeptical about how thoroughly her challenges have undermined her mother's views.

> *…you know what it's really interesting because she doesn't say this stuff to us right because I think that she knows that we're not going to agree with her… but I find her talking about – she makes those kind of generalisations with people who aren't maybe familiar with those groups themselves. So they'll be like people who are visiting from overseas.* [Pania]

In contesting racism Jennifer, Sera and Pania become part of the frontstage, rather than the backstage (Picca & Feagin, 2007). Racist talk and stereotyping continues on the backstage, amongst like-minded family or friends. In line with gendered expectations, it was three women who took on the role of the 'social policing' or contesting racist talk in their families (Picca & Feagin, 2007). These women became feminist killjoys around their family dinner tables (Ahmed, 2017). While racist talk and stereotyping may be constrained in certain contexts, the fact that it continues in other settings demonstrates the structures of racism are deeply embedded within individuals, as Steinbugler (2012) found. Unsettling the historical, institutionalize, cultural practices that privilege whiteness is an onerous undertaking, and these accounts highlight that the degree to which individual contestations can disrupt racism may be limited.

The second research question posed was about the effects of contestations of racism on ongoing talk, family practices, and societal racism. The relationship between racist talk or behaviour and what one *thinks* in terms of racism is worth further interrogation. The examples outlined in this section demonstrate that Pania, Sera and Jennifer's families may have fewer opportunities to express racism, than they might otherwise, if these women did

not challenge problematic talk. This demonstrates the possibility of shifting family practices around racism (Morgan, 1996; Morgan, 2011), and perhaps we should not underestimate the significance of that shift. But does the shift in family practices around what is acceptable racial talk lead to less racist thinking? That these women heard members of their families engaging in problematic talk when they believed they were out of earshot suggests what occurred was a performed change rather than a deeper shift in racial thinking. More importantly, it follows that these interventions in racist talk are also unlikely to produce broader anti-racist social change (Butler, 1997; Pedwell, 2017).

Avoidance, following previous experience of ineffective contestation

At least one third of participants (e.g. Rose, Tim, Nicola, Noreen) spoke about having attempted to contest what they saw as problematic comments within their families. They found their contestations were ineffective and were not motivated to continue challenging racist talk.

> *The one thing that has changed is that now we will avoid topics that we know are going to turn into an argument and we know which topics they are. So we just don't talk about those things.* [Rose]

> *I mean to be frank I steer clear of most topics – like I see them a couple of times a year um – I think like I steer clear of most topics that are – that are contentious.* [Tim]

Notably, the participants who avoided conversations that could lead to racist talk were all White. Contestations are avoided in order to protect important familial relationships (Nelson et al., 2011). Racist talk continues unchecked. As Nelson (2020) observed, through the avoidance of race related talk families, particularly White families, can be a site for the reproduction of racism. Family practices of avoiding conflict, controversy and tension are protective of important care relationships but also protective of racism.

'Works' to some degree for some people

While Nicola was pessimistic about affecting any change in her father, she was more optimistic about her mother. Personality and other personal attributes may play a role in the extent to which racist talk in families can be undermined.

> *And weirdly although I think [my mother] would be prepared to express her prejudice in a very direct way she was also more prepared to change her mind… I think in a way because my dad was a diplomat, and he kept everything nice, she used to sometimes feel like, for gods sake I just want to have – think something through. So she would sometimes raise things, and often around race, that were provocative but I think she was doing it to learn… my dad and I would both try and play the peace keeping roles – that was just the roles that we were used to playing in that family. Mum would turn particularly to dad and say 'for gods sake I am just trying to discuss it' and often at the end you felt that she had changed her views somewhat. In a moment of fearfulness or insecurity she could still express a pretty gross prejudice but actually something had shifted in her.* [Nicola]

The close relationship between Emmanuel and his mother motivated her to understand his views and orientation to cultural difference.

> *So I have pushed back very very gently and I think that there has been a change with my mum. I don't know if it is a change because she wants to do the right thing by me or she actually believes that - I think that's hard to unpack… I don't know if it is a performed change or a real change but um I think there's been slight changes there. I don't even know if you can separate those two things.* [Emmanuel]

Nicola and Emmanuel observed an openness in particular people, to reflect and potentially change their beliefs and behaviours. This may be motivated by a desire to learn or to maintain important family relationships. There may be some individuals who are highly motivated, for different reasons, to develop critical race literacy (Steinbugler, 2012; Twine, 1999). There is an intergenerational element here, with parents wanting to learn from their educationally and geographically mobile adult children. This is in line with recent thinking about socialization, which contests the assumption that most learning is passed from older generations to younger generations (Valentine et al., 2014) and neglects the importance of

intergenerational exchange (Nelson, 2015a). The safety of the backstage (Picca and Feagin 2007), in this case within the context of family relationships, provided an opportunity for these family members to ask questions, to explore and develop their views and associated behaviours. Rather than the performed change that I described earlier, family members that are highly motivated to develop race literacy may be more likely to shift their racial thinking.

8. Summation and Concluding Comments

This paper set out to understand responses to racist talk in families. My first research question asked what strategies family members use to challenge racist talk. Four strategies were identified, including (1) undertaking safe critique and (2) using humour. These strategies were used to contest racist talk within relationships of care, amidst the desire to maintain familial relationships and avoid conflict. These strategies navigated around White Backlash (Yancy, 2018) and while they were protective of relationships, they were also protective of racism. The third strategy, used by a minority of participants, was direct confrontation or violence. Fourthly, participants who were not White drew on personal and familial experiences of racism as a means to contest racist talk, and reflected on this strategy as a potentially powerful tool to undermine racist talk.

The second research question raised here concerned the effects of these strategies on ongoing racist talk, family practices and societal racism. I outlined the way that contestations of racism generate discomfort and raised questions about the significance of discomfort, urging readers to consider when discomfort might be productive. There was a group of participants who avoided contesting racism with certain family members, following ineffective attempts to do so. This response was only reported by White participants, and again, while this avoidance served to protect relationships, it also allowed racist talk to continue unchecked. When racist talk *was* challenged by participants, in some cases racist talk was curbed within a specific context – largely when those objecting to racist talk were within earshot. I referred to this as a 'performed' change, that may reflect a shift in family practices (Morgan, 2011). In contrast, other participants were more optimistic about the effect of their contestations, suggesting that challenging racist talk by

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their families members may have led to deeper insights or shifts in racial literacy (Steinbugler, 2012; Twine, 2004). These shifts in racial literacy may get us closer to shifting habits, closer to social transformation that undermines racism (Butler, 1997; Pedwell, 2017).

Returning to the more macro interest in this paper, given that racism is systemic and institutionalised, what are the effects of individual contestations of racist talk, like those studied in this project? It is these types of challenges to racism that are encouraged by Human Rights Commissions (e.g. Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012; New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2017). This research found that individual contestations of racist talk within families may, at times, shift family practices (Morgan, 2011) away from expressions of racism, or further the development of race literacy amongst *some* family members. However, this appears to be very much a minority response to individual contestations of racist talk. Ahmed (2004) reminds us that identifying White privilege and racism are *not* in and of themselves anti-racist actions. Identifying, and even contesting, racist talk by a family member may seek to stop racist talk, and, optimistically, might sometimes shift racist thinking. However, if we are working towards social transformation, this paper highlights that more effective interventions will focus on cultivating anti-racist actions that much more broadly seek to dismantle racist structures and institutionalised racism.

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