Doing Race on the Internet: a Study of Online Mothering Communities

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Abstract
This paper examines how race is disclosed in online parenting communities. Through a discourse analysis of 10 such communities, I argue that race can be usefully theorised as a practice, and that it is practiced in these communities through seemingly routine actions by participants. I further argue that cyberspace seems to be developing its own racial formations that do not necessarily fully reflect those of place-based communities.

Introduction
This paper examines the disclosure of race in online mothering communities. In the following sections I describe different theoretical approaches to race, examine the scholarship on the Internet and online communities, and I describe and analyse how race is practiced in the communities used for this analysis. I argue that race can be usefully theorised as a practice and that race is practiced in these communities through seemingly routine actions by posters.

Theorising Race

Racial Formation
Racial formation is ‘the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed’ (Omi and Winant 1994: 55). Looking at race as racial formation enables us to consider race as changeable rather than as a fixed set of immutable categories. This suggests that the meanings associated with racial categories will be different in different social locations. For example, ‘black’ refers to people of African descent in the United States, but it most often refers to indigenous people in Australia. This approach emphasises the importance of contextualising discussions of
race. It also allows us to highlight the idea that different racial formations might have different ideological underpinnings.

Lipsitz (1998) and others argue that, in postcolonial societies such as the United States and Australia, white privilege structures social, political and economic relations so that whites are always at the top of the social hierarchy. We might call this approach *hegemonic whiteness*: the idea that social, economic and political relations are structured to ensure that whites will always remain the top of the hierarchy. Lipsitz (1998) refers to this as ‘possessive investment in whiteness’. Australia and the United States can both be thought of as societies where whiteness is hegemonic.

Omi and Winant argue that race is always and necessarily a product of social processes (Omi and Winant 1994). They argue that racial formation occurs through what they call *racial projects*, which make the ideological links between structure (i.e., phenotypical race) and representation (i.e., racial stereotypes) (Omi and Winant 1994). I will argue that it is also useful to conceptualise race as a practice. In practicing race, we do the work that Omi and Winant attribute to racial projects.

We practice race every day when we meet people and make assumptions about them based on their racial category. Essed terms this ‘everyday racism’ (Essed 2001). This type of practice is active, instant and often subconscious. It serves to reinforce racial stereotypes and hierarchies. Looking at race as a practice, then, provides a mechanism by which racial formation occurs and is maintained.

In order for us to practice race, we first need to be able to identify the racial categories of those we encounter. Race is one of the first things that we noticed about others, and although racial categories are now accepted as not being biological markers of difference (Kolko et al. 2000), they are very important socially (Omi and Winant 1994). Online, however, physical racial markers are not evident. If race is to be practiced online, it must first be disclosed.
Race Online

In the early 1990s utopian theorists speculated that the Internet would be a place were social categories would not impact on people in the same ways they do face-to-face (See Nakamura (2002) for a discussion of ‘digital utopians’). In this view, social categories such as race and gender would not impact on people in the same ways they do in face-to-face life. The reality of race and gender online appears to be quite different from these early expectations. Studies suggest that race is important online, particularly whiteness. For example, Kendall argues that participants in the online community she studied operate in a context of hegemonic whiteness (Kendall 2000). She quotes a participant who says that people in the community are either white or comfortable in white spaces. (Kendall 2000). Similarly, Kolko notes that the default race of many online communities is white – ‘racial identity is presumed to be either irrelevant or homogenous’ (Kolko 2000: 217).

Burkhalter found in his study of USENET newsgroups organised around racial topics that participants imputed the race of other participants based on the types of opinions they express. He argues: ‘Stereotyping in the face-to-face interaction follows from assumed racial identity. Online interaction differs in that the imputation tends to go on the other direction -- the stereotype to racial identity’ (Burkhalter 1999: 73). The participants' views about the racial issues they discussed provided the information necessary for other participants to determine their race.

Burkhalter's study was of online communities centred around race. Nakamura's work focusses on racial stereotyping in cyberspace more broadly. She argues that the very ways in which Internet software is designed ‘reveals assumptions about users' race and ethnicity’ (Nakamura 2002: 101). For example, drop-down menus often give users identity choices which then limit them to only certain specified racial or ethnic categories. If we accept that race has different meanings in different social locations, it is clear that racial drop-down menus developed by Americans will not represent the racial experiences of people elsewhere in the world.
Nakamura also highlights issues around the digital divide, the divide between those who have knowledge of and access to the Internet and those who do not (Nakamura, 2002). In developed countries, such as Australia in the United States, research indicates that people who are young, educated, wealthy, and white are more likely to have Internet access and savvy than other groups (Chen et al., 2002). Even the way that Internet use spread throughout society was structured so that whites would have access first, and others later (Sterne 2000). Social cleavages off-line, then, appear to be reproduced online (see Burkhalter 1999; Kendall 2000; Nakamura 2002).

This raises the question: does cyberspace have its own racial formations, or does it reproduce the racial formations of its participants? The research discussed above suggests that, for the most part, cyberspace is a white dominated space.

**Online mothering communities**

This study is of a particular type of online community: the online mothering community. Face-to-face playgroups are often joined by mothers of young children so that they can meet other people with kids of the similar age (Everingham 1994). Online mothering groups are analogous to playgroups. Mothers seek them out for support and information (Miyata 2002).

There are some key differences between face-to-face and online playgroups. First, there are no children in virtual playgroups. Although much of the discussion is about children and their behaviour, children are not physically present. Second, members are likely to be geographically disparate. This means that they are less likely to be able to provide material support to each other, such as babysitting (Miyata 2002). Finally, online mothering communities do not generally have regular meeting times. As they tend to be organised around bulletin board software, members can visit and post messages at any time. This means that social support is given and received on a daily basis; most face-to-face playgroups meet weekly.
Research Methods

Online mothering communities are appropriate and interesting sites for the exploration of questions of race. First, they are not openly organised by race. Second, online mothering communities tend to be organised by expectant mothers' due dates, or by the dates of their children's births. Because of this, new communities are being constantly developed. If race is important in online communities, then I would expect it to occur more often when a new community forms — participants who do not know each other are more likely to do the work involved in uncovering the racial categories of the other members than people who already know each other.

This study analyses posts to online mothering communities at a website which hosts approximately 250 messageboards for parents. Meetamum.com (a pseudonym for the site) is based in North America, but includes playgroups for mothers in different parts of the world. Posts to online mothering communities at meetamum.com were read between November 2004 and January 2005. I analysed posts to 10 groups: five relatively new groups (formed in mid-late 2004), and five established groups, including the Australian mums’ group, the breastfeeding support group, and a group from each of 1999, 2000, and 2001. Groups were selected based on how active they were, as measured by the numbers of daily posts.

The research method used for this project is discourse analysis. Unlike interview data, where the researcher can ask participants what they mean, discourse analysts must take what is written at face value. This is an important limitation -- it means that the intent behind the written words is not always clear. However, race is a sensitive issue and most people in Western societies would not wish to be seen as racist (Frankenberg 1993). This makes it is difficult to get people to speak candidly about race. We practice race when we use our stereotyped understandings of the social characteristics of racial groups and apply them to individual people in order to explain the way they act and to shape our expectations of them. Therefore, it is important to examine the practice of race. It is possible to do this by analysing the posts people make in both racial and nonracial
contexts. Discourse analysis has been used by others to study online communities, especially in the study of race (e.g., Burkhalter, 1999).

Results

Meetamum.com

As mentioned above, meetamum.com is a website dedicated to parenting forums based on children’s ages and other various topics. Many members participate in more than one group. Some groups, particularly place-based and age based groups, appear to be cohesive friendship communities, while others, such as the breastfeeding and debate groups, are more transitive.

Meetamum.com is an American website, and its posters are predominately American. With the exception of the international forums, most groups seem to have only one or two foreign members. Posters include both stay-at-home and work-outside-home mums, and almost all posters are women. Posts to meetamum.com are usually in the form of a question or a comment about something. Topics usually relate to what participants’ children are doing (milestones), struggles around parenting, and discussions of health and sexuality.

Ways of disclosing race online

The newer communities had more posts where race was disclosed than the established communities. One common way that race was disclosed in the newer groups was through getting-to-know-you type questions. ‘What do you look like?’ was a question answered by people describing their appearance and/or posting photos of themselves. Likewise, ‘What colour is your hair?’ and ‘What colour are your eyes?’ elicited racialised responses. Almost all the participants who responded to these questions appeared to be white.

One of the newer age-based communities had a question posted about background (‘What is your background?’), and members took that to mean ethnic background. People
answered with the ethnicity of their parents or grandparents, or in fractions (e.g., ‘I’m a mutt, I’m ¼ Irish, ½ Scottish, and ¼ unknown.’). These responses reflected American participants’ understanding of ethnicity as something that can be multiple (Waters 1990).

Another way that race was disclosed and continuously reinforced was through participants’ practices of posting photos of their children. In some established groups there were regular threads where recent photos were posted. In most of the groups it was the norm for posters to include a ‘signature’ at the end of each of their posts. Signatures usually include the participant’s name, children’s names and ages and often contain photos of children. Posting photos constantly reminds participants of each others’ racial categories. Practicing race through posting photos was common in all the communities.

It is very likely that none of the parents who post photos are doing so with the intent of excluding people who are not white, however it is striking that the vast majority of the posters to these communities appear to be white, even though the countries the communities represent are multi-racial. If you are looking to join the community, and the community does not seem to have any members like you, perhaps you will be hesitant to join. Thus, the mundane practice of posting photos may reinforce cyberspace as a white space.

Apart from regularly having photo threads, the Australian community had few posts that involved racial disclosure. This community appeared to be well established, with numerous members who seemed to know each other well. It may be that if racial disclosure had occurred it was in the past and no longer necessary as members knew each others’ racial categories. However, all members of this community who posted photos appeared white. Australian researchers have argued that white Australia sits in the centre of the nation, and indigenous people and non-white groups are on the periphery (Elder et al. 2004; Hage 1998). Based on the photos posted, the norm in the Australian Parents community is clearly whiteness and this supports the notion of whiteness as being central to Australian identity.
There was also a lack of race work in the breastfeeding support group. This is likely because this group is an information and support group for a specific topic. Posts focused on breastfeeding and participants seemed to post when experiencing difficulty with breastfeeding. When their issues were resolved, they stopped posting. This community had two professional lactation consultants and several experienced mothers who provided advice and support of the ‘you can do this’ variety. The breastfeeding community was not a friendship community and its members did not attempt to get to know each personally.

Like the Australian group and the breastfeeding group, the older age-based groups also did no apparent race work other than the inclusion of photos in photo threads and signatures. Again, these participants have likely been posting together for several years and already know each others’ racial categories. Like the Australian group, those members who posted photos invariably appeared white.

The numbers of getting-to-know-you posts in the five newer communities that focused on appearance were actually few—each community had only one or two such posts. This could be because members’ racial categories are a form of knowledge that, once disclosed, does not need to be re-disclosed unless new members join.

It is possible that non-whites were participating in the communities I studied, but they were not posting their photos or disclosing their race. If a person of colour wanted to join a community where there would be people like them, they would find few groups with openly non-white participants, and many with openly white participants.

It is likely that participants in online communities would not feel that by posting photos of themselves or their children that they are ‘doing race.’ I would argue that because of the centrality of race to our understandings of who and how people are, this curiosity is a racialised one. Part of the power of hegemonic whiteness in cyberspace is that the assumption that everybody is white actively excludes people who are not white. Kendall argues that for the community she studied everyone assumes that everyone else online is
white unless it is otherwise indicated (Kendall, 2000). In the case of online mothering communities this also seems to be the case.

Conclusion

I have suggested that race is practiced in these communities through the seemingly mundane actions of posters, in particular their posting of getting-to-know-you type questions and photos of themselves and their children. It is these routine types of actions that ultimately serve to reinforce and maintain hegemonic whiteness in white dominated societies.

It is possible that, rather than expecting racial formations that have emerged in geographic communities to be reproduced online, it may be more useful to conceive of cyberspace as a separate space which is developing its own meanings around race. The analysis above suggests that cyberspace appears to be a white space, where people of colour exists, but on the peripheries.

The initial promise of cyberspace as a race and gender neutral space has not come to fruition. Studies such as this indicates that social cleavages such as race do appear in online spaces (see also Burkhalter 1999; Kendall, 2000; Nakamura 2002; Sterne 2000). This type of racial stratification online, even if it is unwitting, has real consequences, including the social exclusion of people of colour from public online spaces.

Elder and her colleagues argue, following Hage (1998), that:

By variously narrowing the spaces available to non-White people, by compartmentalizing and prioritizing the attention given to them and by silencing and/or ignoring conversations about the nation that it is unable to mediate, White people seek to guarantee their place at the centre of the Australian nation. (Elder et al. 2004)

By making online spaces into white spaces, the spaces available to non-white people in cyberspace become limited, and non-whites are made to occupy the margins, as they do in face-to-face society.
This analysis raises two important questions about race in online communities: do non-whites not post because they feel excluded? And do non-whites post without disclosing their race/ethnicity? Unfortunately, these questions cannot be answered through content analysis. Examining where and how people of colour participate in online forums would enable us to better understand the mechanisms by which whiteness maintains its hegemony.

References
Kendall, L. (2000) "oh no! I'm nerd!" hegemonic masculinity on an online forum', Gender and Society, 14: 256-274.


**Footnotes**

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