Doing Racial Projects in Requests for Police Service:
The reproduction of racial common sense in emergency calls

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Introduction

In the early summer of 2020, video of an altercation in Central Park went viral. In the video, a white woman is seen telling the Black man recording that she's going to call the police. And moreover, she says, "I'm gonna tell them there's an African American man threatening my life." And she does: although Amy Cooper was the one advancing toward Christian Cooper (no relation), she dials 911 and breathlessly says, "I'm sorry, I'm in the Ramble, and there's a man, African American, he has a bicycle helmet, he is recording me and threatening me and my dog" (Cooper 2020).

To many who watched and shared the video, this was a clear act of racist aggression: a white woman leveraging her perceived vulnerability to endanger a Black man. In an op-ed for the New York Times, Ruby Hamad wrote that Amy Cooper's threat "leaned into the history of lynching black men and boys on the pretext of protecting white women" (Hamad 2020). Those watching the event unfold can see that she was never in danger and that, against the backdrop of countless police murders of Black people,¹ she was the one threatening Christian Cooper's life.

In response to the Central Park incident and many similar cases, public outcry has spurred legal efforts to curb racist false reports. Like much of the public response, these efforts hold individuals accountable for willful misuse of the emergency response system. But what institutional systems make such misuses not only possible, but recurrent?

The institution of police service calls relies on social categorization. To the call-taker on the other end of her call, Amy Cooper's report may have sounded wholly unremarkable, as racial categorization is a routine component of police service calls in the United States. Callers and call-takers alike treat categories like "African American" as a proxy for visual description. In the context of emergency calls and most other interactions, we take for granted that fellow members

of our society share an understanding of what these categories mean. But race means many things in the United States—the optical is only one part. Once race is on the table, a host of meanings become available, including those that position white people as innocent and Black people as criminal.

Race, like all social categories, is a social construct. And we rely on these constructed categories every day of our lives: we take for granted that our people can be sorted into a variety of types (e.g. age, race, gender) and use these categorizations both to form our own actions and to interpret the actions of others (Sacks 1995, Schegloff 2007a). The boundaries and meanings of racial categories are produced, maintained, resisted, and transformed through social practices. And we, as social agents, are always participants in this construction—not only because of our cognitive reliance on categories but also because they have been made integral to the workings of social institutions.

In this paper, I show that institutional reliance on participants' categorization practices offers a window into how those categories (and their boundaries and meanings) are reproduced. The analysis here centers on racial categorization in American emergency service calls as a site of this type of process. I begin by describing how the allocation of police services in the United States relies upon the categorization practices of emergency service callers and call-takers. I then employ an ethnomethodological, conversation analytic approach to show how callers and call-takers use racial categorization in pursuit of their respective projects (to obtain/allocate police response services). I conclude by outlining the significance of these findings for understanding how we reproduce cultural knowledge about categories through social practices, even when primarily engaged in other projects. These findings contribute to the study of social categories

and social inequality, with implications relevant to a range of subfields including sociology of race, criminalization, and culture.

The "Common Sense" of Social Categories

Social categories are an integral part of human life. We use ideas like race, gender, and age to store and organize vast amounts of cultural knowledge. In Sacks's terms, these "membership categorization devices" (e.g. race) are collections of "inference rich" categories (e.g. Asian, white, Black) where knowledge about the category is presumed to apply to any person seen to belong to that category (Sacks and Schegloff 1995:40-41). Categories allow us to create lay theories about the social world (*men are only after one thing; white people don't get it*). They allow us to draw inferences from limited information: identifying Person A as a member of Category X provides an array of presumptive information about what that person does, how to interact with them, and so on (Sacks 1995).

The presumptive information associated with each category is treated as common sense knowledge (Sacks and Schegloff 1995, Schegloff 2007b). This shared "knowledge" does not refer to objective fact, but rather to what people treat as known-in-common: in Garfinkel's words, 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" (Garfinkel 1956:185). Relying on shared knowledge facilitates the formation and interpretation of action, even in interactions between strangers.

Categorization practices serve the gamut of social projects. People use categories to construct all kinds of actions: we might address a person in scrubs as "doctor" to get their attention, help an elder carry heavy groceries, or point a stranger in a dress to the women's restroom. Social movements coalesce around categories like race and gender, where these

devices offer a means to identify patterns of oppression and exclusion (Sacks and Schegloff 1995:339). But, as Sacks observes, membership categorization devices are also a “basic mechanism for social control” (Sacks and Schegloff 1995:49): they provide the foundation for white supremacy, sexism, cissexism, and countless other systems of oppression.

Social scientists have investigated category-based problems in a variety of ways, ranging from the individual scale to the global scale. On the individual scale, psychologists have shown that implicit bias associated with race, gender, and other categories shape how we interpret others, which in turn informs actions we take (e.g. Bargh, Chen and Burrows 1996, Greenwald and Banaji 1995, Phelps et al. 2000). On the societal scale, sociologists have shown how category-based inequalities develop and endure over centuries (e.g. Omi and Winant 2014, Tilly 1998). Implicit bias approaches, focused on the internal cognition of individuals, are unable to capture the real-world enactment of racial logics. Macro-level theories provide vital frameworks for understanding racial logics but rarely connect these frameworks to empirical observations of their constitutive on-the-ground social practices. The study I present here contributes to a body of work that bridges these so-called “micro” and “macro” scales by explicating how we produce and reproduce these categories and their meaning through social interaction (e.g. Kitzinger 2005, Stokoe 2012, Whitehead 2009).

Racial Projects and Criminal Justice in the United States

In this paper, I show the enactment of racial projects in police service request calls. I use these calls to identify specific “social practices that make certain approaches to race thinkable, coherent, and commonsensical” and thus constitute race (Obasogie 2010). In their theory of racial formation, Omi & Winant argue that the process of “race making” (2014:109) occurs through racial projects, which do “the ideological and practical work” of linking structure and

signification (2014:125). They define racial projects as “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources... along particular racial lines” (Omi and Winant 2014:125). Racial projects are not always racist (they do not always reproduce “structures of domination based on racial significance and identities” (Omi and Winant 2014:128)), but they always both reflect and respond to existing racial systems. It is through racial projects that common sense knowledge about race and racial categories is produced.

The racial projects enacted in police service calls are one way that race is deeply intertwined with our systems of law and criminal justice. As Van Cleve and Mayes argue, “conceptions of race shape and impact criminal justice apparatuses and, conversely, criminal justice apparatuses reinforce existing categories, experiences, and social constructions of race” (2015:409). The sociohistorical processes of racial formation in the United States have always been tied to our systems of social control (Feeley and Simon 1992, Omi and Winant 2014, Wacquant 2001), although those ties shift over time. In the contemporary era of “colorblind racism” (Bonilla-Silva 2006), overtly racist laws have been replaced by ostensibly race-neutral laws. But practices of surveillance and enforcement—and even the laws themselves—continue to disproportionately target people of color (Alexander 2020, Feeley and Simon 1992, Gómez 2010, Simon 2007).

By enforcing the laws of a white supremacist and settler colonial society (Collins 1998, Glenn 2009, Glenn 2015), surveilling subjugated communities (Bass 2001, Fagan and Davies 2000, Harcourt 2015, Lynch et al. 2013), and committing racialized violence (Jacobs and O'Brien 1998, Kramer and Remster 2018, Roussell et al. 2021, Siegel 2020), police are a key institution of racial despotism. As described by Omi & Winant, despotic practices include “deprivation of

life, liberty or land; dispossession, violence, confinement, coerced labor, exclusion, and denial of rights or due process” (Omi and Winant 2014:139). Police are agents of all of these. As instruments of legitimized state violence, they kill and injure, issue fines and citations, confiscate belongings, evict people from homes, and make arrests that lead to incarceration. In all of these domains, police disproportionately target and punish Black people, while white people disproportionately enjoy the benefits of their protection (Burton 2015).

Police service calls (by way of the 911 emergency response system) are a means for the distribution of public resources. In theory, emergency resources are available to all who need them: governing bodies collect funds from their constituents, invest those funds in emergency service infrastructures, and then provide constituents with services as needed. Emergency service calls are a key means by which constituents access those services: a civilian can call 911 to report an emergency and (if deemed appropriate) relevant resources will be dispatched, generally at no cost to the caller. In practice, however, emergency resources are unequally distributed and often used in ways that actively harm marginalized people and their communities. Police in particular represent a risk, not an asset, for many Black people and other people of color.

The act of calling 911, and thus access to emergency services, is already unequal (Desmond, Papachristos and Kirk 2016). But on top of this, callers reporting complaints against people of color have the inferences associated with race as an additional resource available to leverage. This is what gave such weight to Amy Cooper’s threat that she would call 911 and say that an “African American man” was threatening her life: the widespread and deep-set ideology associating Blackness with dangerousness and threat (Eberhardt et al. 2006). All of this means that police serve as an available resource for those who occupy the most powerful positions in the racial hierarchy while presenting a threat to the well-being of those in the most subjugated

positions. Calling the police means something different for white people than Black people: white people can trust that police will protect their interests while Black people may consider any interaction with police as a risk (Cao, Frank and Cullen 1996, Desmond, Papachristos and Kirk 2016, Wu, Sun and Triplett 2009).

Callers may have no intention of enacting a racial project when they call the police. But, as is the case in many other contexts, people routinely enact racial and other category projects in the course of pursuing other aims (see Raymond 2019). Once racial categories are invoked, a racial project of some kind is already in action. Indeed, as Schegloff put a proposal by Sacks, “much of the observable orderliness of the world may be better understood as the by-products of ambient organizations which are quite unconcerned with these outcomes, rather than as products which were the design target of some organization” (Schegloff 1989).

Emergency Service Calls

In this paper, I argue that the institutional routine of police service calls relies on race and other forms of social categorization as a basis for visual description, and that this reliance opens the door to racist projects.

Callers seeking emergency services are not granted those services automatically. Instead, call-takers act as gatekeepers who evaluate requests in terms of both genuineness (whether the problem is real) and relevance (whether the problem is a matter of public safety) in order to determine how to allocate emergency resources (Heritage and Clayman 2010:69-86, Whalen, Zimmerman and Whalen 1988, Whalen and Zimmerman 1987a). Call-takers ask a series of questions to assess the caller’s entitlement and gather necessary information and withhold a response to the caller’s request until this interrogative series is complete (Whalen and Zimmerman 1987b, Zimmerman 1984). In the time between making their request and receiving

the call-taker's response (granting or refusing police services), callers and call-takers co-construct entitlement using a variety of interactional resources (e.g. Curl and Drew 2008, Drew and Walker 2010, Raymond 2014, Whalen and Zimmerman 1998). If the caller and call-taker fail to establish an appropriate level of entitlement, call-takers may refuse to dispatch emergency services (Heritage and Clayman 2010, Whalen, Zimmerman and Whalen 1988, Whalen and Zimmerman 1990).

When reporting problems involving other people, callers are routinely asked to provide a description of that person in the interrogative series (that is, before they are told whether service will be granted or denied). Both callers and call-takers treat racial categories as a relevant means of visual description: as Omi & Winant posit in their theory of racial formation, the concept of race is built around phenotypic traits like skin color and hair texture (Omi and Winant 2014:13). Thus, one set of inferences associated with a person categorized by race is their appearance: a person categorized as "Hispanic" is assumed to have brown skin, dark hair, etc.

However, phenotypic traits are only one set of inferences associated with race. In addition to phenotypic inferences, race connotes a host of other "common sense" inferences, making racial categorization both a resource and constraint (Whitehead 2012). Whitehead argues that:

"Racial category membership can contribute to speakers' production of particular courses of action, lend additional weight to actions, and assist recipients in recognizing the actions speakers are producing. Conversely, racial category membership can make it more difficult for certain categories of people to produce a particular action, at a particular moment, for particular recipients, without facing potential interactional difficulties." (Whitehead 2012:1262)

Here I argue that the act of categorizing others entails similar resources and constraints. In the United States, a history of enslavement, settler colonialism, and other forms of exploitation have formed a particular configuration of the race concept and shaped the many inferences associated with each racial category (Glenn 2015, Omi and Winant 2014). In this context of hegemonic white supremacy, Americans tend to associate Black people and other people of color with negative traits, including criminality and danger, while associating white people with positive traits (Dovidio, Evans and Tyler 1986, Eberhardt et al. 2006). These associations inform the inferences people make based on race, meaning callers and call-takers are always accountable for managing them.

Prior research has shown that categories are key interactional resources in the context of police service calls. Because categories are “inference-rich” (Schegloff 2007b), callers strategically deploy and withhold various social categories in service of their project. For example, Meehan (1989) found that callers invoke the category of “gangs” to upgrade the policeworthiness of a complaint. Tracy and Anderson (1999) found that callers use minimized reference terms to avoid disclosing personal relationships with complaint targets in order to manage inferences about the nature and gravity of the problem. In this paper, I show that the use of racial categories for description occasions an opportunity for callers to treat racial categories as similarly meaningful for their project of obtaining police service.

Data & Method

Police service calls are a prime site for examining the situated social practices that reflect and produce racial common sense. Unlike diversity trainings and other contexts in which racial categories are the topic of discussion, participants in police service calls use categories in service

of an ostensibly unrelated project: for callers, requesting police resources; for call-takers, determining the appropriate allocation of police resource. In such calls, both parties have stakes in the outcome of the call (Raymond and Zimmerman 2007, Whalen and Zimmerman 1990, Zimmerman 1984). Callers have an incentive to seem reasonable or else risk being denied service (Whalen, Zimmerman and Whalen 1988, Whalen and Zimmerman 1998). Call-takers are held responsible for following protocol and making reasonable decisions. Both callers and call-takers are accountable, then, for how they use social categories: callers may be treated with suspicion if call-takers hear their uses of race as racist, for example, and callers may resist responding to call-takers questions if they hear the questions as inappropriate. Thus, as in any context, participants must balance their use of available interactional resources (which may include social categories like race and gender) with the risk of undermining their own projects; in the case of police service calls, callers may risk denial of service while call-takers may risk inefficacy. This makes police-relevant service calls a “perspicuous setting” (Garfinkel 1996) for the study of social categorization practices.

The data used for this study are audio recordings of police-relevant service calls that originated from two collections. The first is a set of 50 English language calls collected from an urban emergency services call-taking center in Southern California. These calls were collected by recording all incoming calls through three shifts (day shift, mid shift, and night shift). The second collection is a set of 70 English language calls from urban, suburban, and rural settings across the United States² made publicly available by journalists and news outlets. All calls took place between 2005-2015. The two collections serve complementary purposes: the Southern California collection provides a cross-section of the types of calls dispatch centers handle while the selection of publicly available calls provides diversity of geographic context. I initially

listened to all calls in these collections, including medical and fire requests. Upon finding that police requests were the only calls that routinely involved racial categorization, I restricted the present study to police requests. This also serves to maintain a degree of consistency in callers' objectives and call-takers' protocols. I analyzed the data first by listening to the audio recordings noting thematic observations about how callers categorize complaint targets in each call, paying particular attention to racial categorization. The final data set used for this study, including only police-relevant calls in which a complaint target is mentioned, is composed of 14 of the Southern California calls and 50 of the publicly available calls for a total of 64 calls.

I analyzed the data using an ethnomethodological, conversation analytic approach. Consistent with this approach, I treat the participants' utterances as forms of social action, attending to interactional practices (what they do and how they do it) rather than their intentions or motivation. I examined the interactional trajectory of each call with careful attention to when and how racial categories were invoked and used. Importantly, my interest was focused on participants' orientations: the ways that callers and call-takers observably treat racial categories (Whitehead 2019). After this initial pass, I developed a candidate typology of categorization practices and revisited the calls for a deeper analysis. I then tested and refined emerging hypotheses in an iterative process by forming candidate collections, describing their features, and then reexamining the data to refine my groupings and descriptions. The excerpts shown here were transcribed using the conventions developed for conversation analysis, primarily by Gail Jefferson (Jefferson 2004). The data excerpts I analyze in detail below exemplify the range of categorization practices callers and call-takers employ in service of requesting and allocating police resources during calls.

Analysis

Both callers and call-takers in my data set treat social categorization as a routine part of police service requests. Callers and call-takers alike treat gender, race, and age categories as shorthand for visual description. In what follows, I will focus on how one categorization device in particular—race—is used in these calls. I first show how the institutional routine of emergency calls relies on racial categorization as a basis for visual description. I then show that this routine reliance opens the door for mobilizing and orienting to racist inferences. In all cases, participants enact racial projects in the process of requesting/allocating police services.

Routine reliance on race

First, it is worth considering how racial categorization is introduced to the 911 interaction. Both callers and call-takers initiate racial categorization in 911 calls: callers volunteer race, either in response to a description request or independently, and call-takers ask race questions (e.g. “What race is he?” in Extract 1, below, or “Is he white, Black, or Hispanic?” in Excerpt 2, below). In all such cases in my collection, the participants treat race as observable (i.e. something that any competent observer should be able to see) and relevant to future action (i.e., that racial categorization can help police identify the complaint target). In what follows, I first show how call-takers initiate racial categorization as a routine component of police service calls. I then show how callers initiate racial categorization, also treating it as an expected component of description. From there, I show how this routine reliance on race as a basis for description creates an opportunity for callers and call-takers to use racial categories as resources for sense-making, including callers mobilizing racist inferences to bolster their bids for police response.

Call-Taker Initiated Racial Categorization

Call-takers in my data routinely asked race questions alongside questions about complaint targets' clothing, gender, and other features, treating racial categorization as a basis for description. When call-takers asked callers to identify the complaint target's race, they formulated their questions either by asking an open category request (e.g. "What race is he?" in Extract 1, below) or by nominating two to four racial categories as options ("Is he white, Black, or Hispanic?" in Extract 2, below). Both formulations treat race as something any competent observer can perceive and categorize on sight.

In the call below, a night baker in a donut shop reports that two people came into the shop and took some donuts and her car keys. Prior to the exchange in this excerpt, the call-taker has asked a number of questions about the incident and establishes that the caller does not know the complaint targets but saw them and talked to one of them. After inquiring whether the caller saw any weapons, the call-taker asks for that person's race:

Extract 1: Donut Shop

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1    911: -> okay what do:es: uh w- what race is he.
2              (0.2)
3    CLR: -> he:'s African American, he's ba::ld, u:m
4              he's wearing a gre:y like wife
5              [beater kinda tank] top,
6    911:    [okay how-          ]
7              how tall is he:

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This particular question ("what race is he?") both treats race as relevant to the business of the call and presupposes that the caller knows the complaint target's race. The caller has already reported that they do not know the complaint target but that they did see and talk to them. Notably, the call-taker produces this race question as a repair after abandoning an utterance initially started as "okay what does," which could be projected as "okay what does he look like?". The caller pauses for 0.2 seconds before responding, and then provides an answer that initially aligns with the terms of the question. By providing a racial category ("he's African

American”), the caller implicitly ratifies the relevance of race (or at least declines to resist). However, the caller continues on, stating that “he’s bald” and “wearing a grey like wife beater kinda tank top.” In doing so, the caller treats the call-taker’s question about race as a question about the complaint target’s appearance.

Open category requests like this solicit a racial category in response (e.g. “white”) but leave the category options and lexical choice to the caller. It relies on a presumption that the caller and call-taker share an understanding of the range of relevant racial categories and that the category the caller provides will convey information relevant to the business of the call. Additionally, there are multiple terms the caller could choose from to refer to a given racial category, each having a different set of connotations (e.g. “Black” vs. “African American” vs. a slur).

Alternatively, call-takers can nominate racial categories for the caller, as seen below. Here, the caller reports a “gentleman walkin’ in the neighborhood” and the call-taker asks if the gentleman is “white, Black, or Hispanic”:

Extract 2: “Pickin Up Trash” – Initial Complaint

10 CLR: I'm with thuh neighborhood wa:tch 'n we've had som::e
 11 uh burglaries and vandalisms: (.) lately, (0.3) and u:m
 12 .hh this eh- n::gentleman was walkin' in the neighborhood,
 13 .hh an' I seen'im befor::e. on trash day:s, .hh
 14 goin' around pickin' up tra:sh, I dunno what his deal is,
 15 .hh[h I know: he-
 16 911: -> [Is he white Black 'r Hispanic.
 17 (0.9)
 18 CLR: -> Black.
 19 (0.4)
 20 911: What is he wearing.

Where the open category questions (“what race is he?”) leave both racial categories and lexical choices up to the caller, listed category questions nominate specific categories and lexical choices. The call-taker’s question here (“is he white Black ‘r Hispanic”) is a recurrent version of this question type in my collection: a three-part list (see Jefferson 1990) including “white,”

“Black,” and either “Hispanic” or “Latino.”³ This formulation treats “white,” “Black,” and “Hispanic” (or “Latino”) as the racial categories most relevant to the local context. Callers most often align with the categories and terms offered, as the caller does here by responding “Black.” Callers can reply with an unlisted category (e.g. “South Asian”) or alternative word choice (e.g. “African American”), but such responses will be hearable as marked departures from the terms provided (Raymond 2003, Stivers and Hayashi 2010), and may thus be scrutinized for the significance of that departure.

In both of the cases above, the call-taker asks the caller to racially categorize the person they have called to complain about. In doing so, the call-takers invoke racial categorization as relevant information for the business at hand and treat race as an observable trait that a) the caller can identify and b) that can be used by others later. In both cases the callers provide responses aligned with the terms of the question, and thus with the call-takers’ treatment of race.

Caller Initiated Racial Categorization

Callers also initiated racial categorization in my data, sometimes in response to a call-taker’s question and other times unprompted. In these cases, callers also treated race as a routine basis for description.

Call-takers sometimes ask general description requests, like “what did they look like?”. Unlike race-specific questions, these leave the means of description up to the caller. Callers often respond to general description requests with racial categories, as in Extract 3:

Extract 3:

“Gun in the Walmart” – General Description Request

1	911:	Beaver Creek nine one one, (.) where is your emergency?
2	(?):	hh
3	CLR:	I’m at the: uh Beaver Creek Walmart, (.) there’s ay: u:h
4		gentleman walking around with a <u>gu:n</u> : in: the store.
5		(1.0)

6 911: Is he got it pulled ou:t=h?
 7 CLR: Yeah. he's like pointing it at people.
 8 911: -> What does he look like_
 9 CLR: -> He's a black male prob'ly about six foot tall,
 10 (1.2)/((typing))
 11 911: M:ka:y, °.h° what's he wearin?=-

Here the caller selects race, gender, and height as a means of providing visual description. This again treats race as an observable trait: that the caller can categorize the complaint target on sight and that the category “Black” conveys relevant information about his appearance to the call-taker. Notably, the caller qualifies their assessment of the complaint target's height with “probably about” but indicates no such equivocation about race and gender categorization. By saying “mkay” and continuing with a next question, the call-taker accepts the caller's use of race, gender, and height as a basis for description.

In other cases, callers volunteer racial information without any prompting from the call-taker. In my collection, call-takers often haven't even had a chance to ask a question before callers volunteer it. Callers sometimes categorize people by race in their initial problem description, as in Extract 4 below:

Extract 4: “Yellow F-150”

1 911: Charlotte nine one one Bellamy, do you
 2 need police, (0.2) fire (0.2) or medic.
 3 (0.6)
 4 CLR: I need a police officer::
 5 OTR: °on oak road.° ((background))
 6 CLR: on oak ro:ad. I'm drivin behind a yellow
 7 tru:ck, (0.2) it's ay <eff one
 8 fifty.>=the tag says
 9 ---tape cut---
 10 CLR: -> it's got a black man on it with no::
 11 shirt on, (1.0) a::nd he's got his arm
 12 in a ca:st he's got some black pants
 13 o:n (0.5) ~u:m~ he's beatin on the back
 14 of this (.) °m-° truck window and the
 15 truck is drivin=I don't know if he's
 16 (0.2) tryin to break i::n, er (0.2)
 17 somethin's just look (.) cra:zy.
 18 (1.0)

19 CLR: It's a gi:rl dri::vin it.
 20 (1.3)
 21 CLR: And now they turnin (0.3) and (.) it's
 22 (.) turnin onto <oak dale ro:ad.>
 23 911: offa what street.
 24 CLR: Off of u::m oak (.) oak dri::ve.
 25 (0.5)
 26 CLR: Goin down <oak dale ro::ad.>
 27 (2.3)
 28 911: You said the vehicle's occupied by a
 29 -> black fema:le?
 30 CLR: Ig- that's what it look like that was
 31 -> dri::vin it, an a black ma:le hangin on
 32 the back of it.
 33 (0.2)
 34 CLR: -> The black male doesn't have on a shi:rt,
 35 (0.2)
 36 911: ([])
 37 OR?: [(]) on
 38 (0.2)
 39 CLR: (It) have a ca:st on it looks like the
 40 le:ft a:rm,
 41 (1.5)
 42 911: Are <you all> still behind them?

By volunteering racial information, callers nominate race as relevant to the business of the call. Some callers also markedly re-state race in subsequent mentions, as this caller does in line 34, which re-invokes (and thus insists upon) the relevance of race. None of the call-takers in my collection treated this as unusual or problematic. Instead, as in the case above, they accept the information and often ratify the caller's use of race by asking a related confirmation request (see lines 28-29 above).

In all cases, the caller and call-taker co-construct the relevance of race together. Whoever brings up race first is responsible for nominating its relevance to the interaction, but the recipient can ratify or resist that nomination. The recipient's response indicates their stance: they can resist (see Stokoe 2015) or, whether by contributing an overt stance or simply moving forward, they can actively or tacitly accept their co-participant's treatment of race. The acceptance and ratification seen in the above extracts are representative of patterns in the larger dataset, where

resistance is largely absent. Such treatment both aligns with and produces the sense that racial categorization is a relevant and routine component of police service calls.

Mobilizing and Orienting to Racist Inferences

In the police service call context, race and other membership categorization devices are routinely used as a basis for visual description. Innocuous as it may seem, these practices advance a racial project by constituting race as a readily observable and categorizable trait. But the use of race for description also presents an opportunity for callers and call-takers to use race for sense-making. In the following analysis, I show the in situ enactment of racist racial projects: interactional practices that rely on racist inferences and thus reflect and reproduce “structures of domination based on racial significations and identities” (Omi and Winant 2014:128).

When race is treated as a routine component of police service requests, racist inferences can be mobilized in a number of ways. Callers complaining about people of color have an opportunity to mobilize taken-for-granted racial common sense as support for their requests for police help. Call-takers, dispatchers, and police officers may make decisions using racist inferences based on the categorization made during the call. Thus, institutional reliance on race as description opens the door for practices that privilege white people and discredit people of color--in other words, practices that reflect and produce racist racial projects.

In the following case, a call-taker’s description-oriented race question starts a trajectory that ultimately leads to the caller mobilizing racist inferences in support of their bid for police service. An assistant manager of a fast food restaurant reports a conflict with three teenagers who have been taking soda without paying for it:

Extract 5: “Stealing Soda”—Initial Request

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1   911:      >Tallahassee police department Angela
2           speaking how may I help you<
3   CLR: ->  H:i I need three teenagers removed from

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4 my store right away,
 ((11 lines omitted))
 15 CLR: So now he's fighting with me and refuses
 16 to leave.
 17 (2.8)
 18 911: ↓#Okay:↓=h
 19 -> U:h males females black=white,
 20 (0.2)
 21 CLR: -> Male black about six foot.
 22 911: All o[f em?]
 23 CLR: [All]three of em
 24 Yep!
 25 (0.8)

The caller responds to the call-taker's gender and race question with gender and racial categories, but also adds height (line 21). The caller fully aligns with the call-taker's question agenda, adding another visual marker to the list of descriptors.

Up until this point, both the caller and call-taker have oriented to race only as a basis for description. But the caller then takes the opportunity presented by the 0.8-second silence (line 25) to bolster her complaint by mobilizing racist inferences:

Extract 6: "Stealing Soda" – Response and Closing

21 CLR: -> Male black about six foot.
 22 911: All o[f em?]
 23 CLR: [All]three of em
 24 Yep!
 25 (0.8)
 26 CLR: -> An I'm like a five foot little white
 27 -> girl. so it's li:ke .h h .h they're not
 28 -> gonna listen to me no matter what I say.
 29 (4.8)
 30 911: .h (.) all:: right.=we'll get somebody
 31 out there as soon as we can.=they're
 32 inside right now?
 33 CLR: Yep!
 34 911: Ao:kay we'll get somebody out there.
 35 CLR: >Thank you<
 36 911: >Uh huh buhbye.<
 37 ((click))

In lines 26-27, the caller provides her own height, race, and gender. The call-taker has not asked for this information, but by volunteering it the caller juxtaposes her own social position

against that of the teenagers. The caller emphasizes the contrast by inserting the descriptor “little” and choosing the reference term “girl” (as opposed to woman), using her self-description to claim to vulnerability. The caller then states the upshot: that because she is a “five foot little white girl” the three “male[s], Black, about six foot” will not listen to her “no matter what” she says (line 28). The caller makes this connection explicit by her use of “so” (line 27) (Bolden 2009, Raymond 2004).

This caller uses social categorization as a means of upgrading the urgency and/or legitimacy of her request for police assistance. Her description of the complaint targets invokes associations between Black masculinity and criminality/threat while her self-description invokes associations between white femininity and innocence/vulnerability. The call-taker then grants the caller’s request in her next turn (“Alright we’ll get somebody out there as soon as we can,” lines 30-31) but rushes to add another question (“they’re inside right now?” lines 31-32). This is a departure from the typical emergency call sequence in which the call-taker withholds a response to the caller’s complaint until they are ready to close the call (see Heritage and Clayman 2010, Raymond and Zimmerman 2016). The call-taker then re-grants the caller’s request (line 34).

This use of social categories relies on a mutual understanding of race and gender as an index of social position. Specifically, this caller’s bid for uptake relies on the racist “common sense” that white women are vulnerable, especially to Black masculinity.⁴ Without this understanding, the caller’s upshot would be unintelligible (consider a hypothetical counterexample in which a caller says, “she has long hair and I have short hair, so she’s not going to listen to me no matter what I say”). By mobilizing her own race, the caller not only exposes her own understanding of the relationship between white femininity and Black masculinity, but also relies upon the call-taker’s commensurate understanding.

Callers use race in ways that are specific to their local projects. While the caller in Extracts 5 and 6 used whiteness to index vulnerability, the caller in the case below uses race to mark someone as out of place. This extract is from the same call presented in Extract 2 (“Pickin Up Trash”) in which a caller says their neighborhood has recently had burglaries and vandalisms and reports a “gentleman” picking up trash. The excerpt below takes place a few seconds after the end of Extract 2, in which the call-taker asked “is he white, Black, or Hispanic?” and the caller replied “Black.” After asking what the complaint target is wearing, the call taker asks what he is doing:

Extract 7: “Pickin Up Trash”

34 911: And what is he doing.
 35 (1.0)
 36 CLR: He keeps going:: to this guy's house.=I know him: I know
 37 thuh resident. He:'s (.) Caucasian_ .hh he- an' he('s) going
 38 up to the house an'then going along thuh side of it? .hh
 39 and then coming to the street(h). and then going back to
 40 thuh side of ih-=I doh'know what he's doing, I doh'wanna
 41 approach him: personally, .hhh uh::m:: If you have ah-an:
 42 (0.5) an officer available .hh I'd prob'ly (.) -have 'im
 43 stop on: (0.6) Rinehardt, across the street from Walter
 44 Meads Bentley:, 'n:: 'n go around the ba:ck.
 45 911: >Okay .h John wh-< (.) John what's your:: (0.4) .hh
 46 >telephone number you c'n be reached at.
 47 ((redacted))
 48 CLR: >Okay we'll get someone out there.=Thanks f'r calling.
 49 ()
 50 911: (Thanks bye.)

The caller says the man “keeps going” to a house belonging to someone the caller knows. The caller then adds that the person who lives in the house is “Caucasian” (line 37). This detail reaches beyond the agenda set by the call-taker’s question (it has nothing to do with what the complaint target is doing), but in the context of this caller’s complaint, it marks the “gentleman” as out of place. By saying that the resident is “Caucasian” after categorizing the complaint target as “Black,” the caller uses race to discount the possibility that this person has rights to be at this house.

Callers' treatment of social categories reflect the asymmetrical inferences they index. In Extract 6 ("Stealing Soda"), the caller used race, gender, and height to depict herself as vulnerable to the teenagers she complained about. In Extract 7 ("Pickin' Up Trash"), the caller used race to mark the person he complained about as out of place. But callers do not always need to juxtapose categories against one another to reveal asymmetrical inferences. In Extract 9 below, the caller reports that an intruder has "walked right into" their house and is "definitely under the influence of something." After obtaining the caller's address and establishing details of the unfolding event, the call-taker asks what the intruder looks like:

Extract 8: "Off His Rocker"

```

1      911:      What does he look like. can you tell me?
2      OTR:      (aw right) ((in background))
3      CLR:      He can't- it's- (.) this- (.) ( )
4      911:      Is he whi:te Hispanic bla::ck_
5                (0.2)
6      CLR: ->   No he's white, he's- he looks like well to do=h (0.2)
7                -> actually.=He looks like a rich white man.
8      911:      Now is it possible for you to tell me what
9                this guy is wearing,
```

When the caller seems to have trouble responding to the call-taker's general description request (line 3) the call-taker replaces the question with a category-listed request (line 4). The caller begins her response to the call-taker's race-listed request with "No he's white" (line 6), even though "white" was the first category the call-taker offered (line 4). The caller continues, saying the intruder "looks like well to do actually" (line 6). By using "actually," the caller marks the complaint target's whiteness and class status as contrary to expectations: that one would not expect a "rich white man" (line 7) to invade someone else's home and act in an erratic manner. Here, the caller isn't using the complaint target's race as an index of threat on its own, but instead relies on racist inferences in marking how unexpected the intruder's behavior is. These

Cases like those detailed above can shed light on cases where callers are less transparent in the inferences they invoke. Consider Extract 10, below:

1 911: Osceola sheriff's office this line is recorded may I
2 help you?
3 (1.0)
4 CLR: hh Yes ma'am I don't know what's going on but I'm over
5 here at () road and (Lake Shore=at) Mike Pearson's
6 -> hou:se? .hh and there's Black men walkin around with
7 ri:fles (man/ma'am) an' somebody needs to get here quick.
8 (0.3)
9 CLR: Somebody needs to get here fa:st.
10 ----tape cut----
11 911: Kay what does the tru:ck look like.
12 (1.0)
13 CLR: U::h bla::ck=u:h ma'am I could turn around a bla:ck
14 escalade type fou: door.
15 (0.2)
16 -> Black man with long dread locks. The other guys: other
17 -> Black men are wearing black=h, (.) the white boy's (.)
18 -> in the driveway with his hands up. That one Black guy's
19 got a big ol:: gu:n: ma'am.
20 (0.2)
21 Bi:g [gun.
22 911: [°kay.°
23 ----tape cut----
24 CLR: You need me to go get a gun? () gonna sho:ut this
25 -> white boy. You better get somebod[y here ().
26 911: [I- sir wer-
27 ----tape cut----
28 CLR: (I don't wanna go) sho:ut cuz I don't know what's goin
29 -> o::n but. They got this whi:te boy (out there) with his
30 ha:nds up.
31 (0.2)
32 -> I don't know what's happenin (to). Three ra:sta gu:ys=
33 911: O[ka:y.]
34 CLR: -> [got thu]::h (0.4) drea:locks.
35 (.)
36 And they're wearing straight black, and >they're in a<
37 black escalade or something
38 ----tape cut---
39 CLR: I've got a shotgun with me.

Here the caller refers to the complaint targets using race in his initial complaint (line 6) and then repeatedly throughout the interrogative series (see lines 16, 17, 18, 25, and 29). In addition to his explicit categorization of the alleged complaint targets as “Black” and alleged victim as “white,” he uses racially coded references like “Rasta” and “dreadlocks” (lines 32 and 34, respectively). The caller juxtaposes the complaint targets’ Blackness (lines 6, 16-18, 32, 34) with the supposed victim’s whiteness (lines 17 and 18). Additionally, the caller uses different gender terms for the parties, referring to the complaint targets as Black men and the purported victim as a white boy. It is notable also that this caller asserts a willingness to use deadly force against the alleged complaint targets (lines 24, 28, 39), and formulated this at first as an offer if the dispatcher “needs” him to defend the supposed victim (line 24).

In some of this caller’s uses of race he ostensibly treats it as a means of description. For example, in line 16 he describes both race and hair and in line 17 he describes race and clothing. However, his repeated use of race goes well beyond what might be considered description. The caller indexes race in almost every mention of both the complaint targets and the supposed victim in this excerpt: he uses “Black” in four out of six mentions of the alleged complaint targets (once repairing a raceless mention to include “Black,” lines 16-17), and one of the remaining two mentions is racially coded (“Rasta guys,” line 32). He also includes “white” in all three mentions of the supposed victim. Each of these uses of race goes against the preference for minimization—that “on occasions when reference is to be done, it should preferably be done with a single reference form” (Sacks and Schegloff 1979)—and thus do more work than simple reference (Schegloff 1996). For example, “men” would have been sufficient for the reference in line 6, thus the caller’s use of “Black” is a marked departure from preferred minimization. The departure is not random: the caller is using each mention as an opportunity to index race. The

fact that the caller repeatedly refers to the supposed victim as white and the alleged complaint targets as Black again juxtaposes supposed white vulnerability against supposed Black criminality.

Racial Projects in Interactional Practice

The data I have presented here demonstrate how social categorization functions as an integral part of requests for police service. Omi and Winant argue that racial projects “are taking place all the time, whenever race is being invoked or signified, wherever social structures are being organized along racial lines” (Omi and Winant 2014:13). Police service calls are one site where we can observe the interactional practices that constitute race. In doing so, we are able to empirically examine racial projects being done in situ.

This paper has shown that the institutional routine of police service calls relies upon the racial categorization practices of callers and call-takers. Even in cases where nothing more than institution-relevant description work is done, these practices reflect and reproduce the taken-for-granted assumption that race is “seen” (Obasogie 2010): that people can discern a person’s race from even the most fleeting glance, and that a racial category provides information others can use to identify an unknown person (i.e. that officers can use race to identify a complaint target). In other words, even when nothing demonstrably racist is happening, racial common sense is being systematically used and reproduced.

Like all instances of categorization, these interactions are part and parcel with the broader context of American white supremacy in which the police and other state forces disproportionately surveil, fine, incarcerate, injure, and kill Black people and other people of color. Given that police service requests initiate an action trajectory that can lead to such actions, emergency service calls deserve further research and public attention.

This paper calls attention to how these tacit, taken-for-granted understandings of social categories, particularly race, both reflect and reproduce systems of oppression. When callers use racial categories in police request calls they not only draw upon assumed existing understandings of race, but also participate in the production of those understandings. Racist actions are not limited to the realm of slurs, segregation, and overt violence—they also involve the ways people make sense of and use racial categories in their everyday lives. These daily sense-makings, here made visible in emergency service calls, form the foundation upon which the larger oppressive system relies. Through these sense-making practices, we “do” race (West and Zimmerman 1987, West and Fenstermaker 1995), and thus “sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements” based on social categories (West and Zimmerman 1987:146). By paying due attention to these processes, researchers can expose and challenge the ways in which people maintain and reproduce systems of oppression.

Footnotes

¹ Coincidentally, the day that Amy Cooper threatened Christian Cooper was the same day that Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd. Chauvin pressed his knee onto Floyd's neck for over nine minutes as three other officers prevented bystanders from intervening. Along with the murder of Breonna Taylor and others, Floyd's murder spurred a summer of nationwide protests in defense of Black lives.

² Geographic areas represented in the data include, by state: Arizona (Glendale, Mesa); California (Anaheim, Bel Air, Compton, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Pacific Palisades, Pasadena, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Monica, Sherman Oaks, Richmond, West Hollywood); Florida (Miami, Osceola County, Sanford, St. Cloud, Tallahassee); Georgia (Atlanta, Dekalb County); Illinois (Chicago); Michigan (Warren, West Bloomfield); Missouri (St. Louis); New Jersey (Chatham); New York (Manhattan); North Carolina (Charlotte, Raleigh); Ohio (Beavercreek, Cleveland); Oklahoma (Norman); South Carolina (Charleston); Washington (Bellevue, Sprague).

³ Sometimes the call-taker only lists black and white, and my dataset includes one case in which "Asian" is listed as a fourth item.

⁴ I avoid using the term "men" or "boys" here because the caller initially categorized the complaint targets as "teenagers" (Extract 5, line 3).

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