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# 'Maybe it is prejudice ... but it is NOT racism': Negotiating racism in discussion forums about Gypsies

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## Abstract

This article addresses the ways in which opposition towards Gypsies is debated, with particular regard to whether or not this opposition constitutes racism or prejudice towards a group shown to be vulnerable and subject to discrimination. A discursive analysis of a corpus of internet discussion forums about Gypsies in the UK is undertaken. The analysis demonstrates that opposition towards Gypsies can be presented as racist; however, such accusations are met with criticism so that writers become accountable for making them. While writers do go to rhetorical lengths to dissociate themselves from being presented as racist, there is nevertheless an acceptance that opposition to Gypsies may constitute prejudice. This prejudice is presented as an inevitable result of Gypsies' behaviour and, of particular note, appears to be deemed acceptable. The implications of this finding for the discursive literature on taboos against, and denials of, racism are discussed.

## Keywords

Discourse analysis, discursive psychology, Gypsies, hatred, internet discussion forums, prejudice, racism, Romany, taboo

## Introduction

This article focuses on a debate where opposition towards Gypsies is displayed, and in particular where this debate deals with whether or not such opposition should be viewed

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as constituting racism or prejudice. It is first shown that Gypsies are a vulnerable group who are subject to prejudice and discrimination. Next, the discursive literature on prejudice is introduced, with particular attention given to developments that have shown that making accusations of racism may be as problematic as racist comments themselves. As a result of this, the case is made for addressing the ways in which talk about racism and prejudice is managed in an online discussion forum about Gypsies.

### *The harsh treatment of Gypsies*

The term Gypsy refers to Travellers and Romany people, who are recognised as an ethnic group in the UK under the Race Relations Act 1976 (amended 2000). There is a wealth of literature that shows that Gypsies are a vulnerable group that suffers discrimination throughout Europe (e.g. Marcu, 2005) and in the UK, where research suggests that hostility towards them is relatively acceptable compared to hostility towards other ethnic groups (Tileaga, 2006). In the UK, this discrimination manifests itself in terms of Gypsies being one of the most deprived groups (Ellis and McWhirter, 2008), with the lowest life expectancy and highest child mortality of any ethnic group in the country (Van Cleemput, 2010).

In education, Gypsy children underachieve (Ellis and McWhirter, 2008) and, although they commit no more crimes than other groups (O'Nions, 1995), if prosecuted they are more likely than other group members to be denied bail, to be imprisoned and to die in custody (Meek, 2007). It is difficult for Gypsies to gain permission to settle on land to live, meaning that many live on unauthorised sites (Ellis and McWhirter, 2008), a situation that has shown to be damaging to their mental health and social integration (Cemlyn and Clark, 2005). When unauthorised sites are cleared, as was the case with the 'Dale Farm' camp,<sup>1</sup> it has been shown that extreme force is used to remove residents (Kabachnik, 2010).

Gypsies are nevertheless presented negatively in media and political spheres. Schneeweis (2010) shows how Gypsies are presented as thieves and beggars, and Bowers (2010) highlights how headlines about Gypsies – that would be deemed unacceptable about other ethnic minorities – are present in the UK, with a particularly prejudicial example being 'Winning the war against Travellers' (2010: 6). Turner (2002) showed that the same negative presentation of Gypsies is also present in British parliamentary debates, where again Gypsies are presented as dirty and as criminals. Gypsies, therefore, have been shown to be a vulnerable group that is presented negatively in the media and by politicians.

### *Discursive psychology and race and prejudice talk*

Throughout its history, discursive psychology has focused on the ways in which prejudice and racism are managed in talk, with Billig (1988: 95) describing the 'norm against prejudice', in which it was demonstrated that speakers will do rhetorical work to avoid being labelled as being prejudicial; being labelled as such can bring about connotations of being irrational (Edwards, 2003). In their review of (critical) discursive literature on talk about prejudice, Augoustinos and Every (2007) identify five major strategies that are

used by speakers to avoid being seen to violate these norms: the 'denial of prejudice' (2007: 125), 'grounding one's views as reflecting the external world' (2007: 127), 'positive self and negative other presentation' (2007: 129), discursive deracialisation (2007: 133) and 'liberal arguments for "illiberal" ends' (2007: 134). The denial of prejudice is exemplified by the use of disclaimers, where speakers deny that what follows is racist. The grounding of views as reflecting the external world is a strategy used to present any opinions that could potentially be seen as prejudicial as being grounded in reason, and therefore as rational. Positive self and negative other presentation refers to the ways in which an 'us and them' distinction is made where the in-group is presented as good, in contrast to the out-group. Discursive deracialisation is the way in which references to 'race' can be removed from talk that may appear to be about race. Finally, liberal arguments for liberal ends refers to the strategy in which supposedly liberal ideals, such as treating everyone the same, are used to argue for illiberal actions; an example of this is use of the notions of fairness and equality to argue against affirmative action schemes that are designed to overcome existing inequalities in New Zealand (Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

There is, however, a problem with the way in which the terms and concepts of 'prejudice' and 'racism' are used within social psychology, including discursive psychology, in that the two are often used interchangeably with few attempts at disambiguating them. Augoustinos and Every (2007), for example, offer one of the most detailed reviews of the discursive literature in this field and refer to the 'language of 'race' and prejudice', using the two interchangeably, and the seminal study 'mapping the language of racism' refers to talk designed to 'dodge the identity of prejudice' (Wetherell and Potter, 1992: 211). Billig (1988) suggests that the social psychological association of prejudice predominantly with issues of race and nation can be traced back to Allport (1954). Nevertheless, Figgou and Condor (2006) point out that there is no commonly agreed definition of prejudice, and instead focus on how members of the public make sense of both this and racism, although they also do not distinguish between the two.

Discursive psychology has been used to directly address talk about Gypsies. Tileaga (2005, 2006) showed how talk about Gypsies can be extremely prejudicial, with Gypsies (the victims) being blamed for prejudice towards them on the grounds that they are not just different from 'us', but are also a morally inferior group that does not belong in the host nation (in this case Romania). Leudar and Nekvapil (2000) addressed the representation of Gypsies in televised debates held in the Czech Republic. Like Tileaga, they found Gypsies to be presented as different from the majority group because they are not normal. Again, they were presented as a problem and as likely to be criminals. More recently, Rowe and Goodman (in press) addressed discussion forum posts in the UK and found that Gypsies were presented as different, immoral and likely to be criminal, and described in dehumanising ways that legitimised their harsh treatment and further exclusion from society. Therefore, through positive self and negative other presentation (Augoustinos and Every, 2007), Gypsies are presented in extremely negative and dehumanising (Billig, 2002) ways.

In addition to these features of race and prejudice talk (again, the two terms are not distinguished), however, it has been demonstrated that there is increasingly a norm against making *accusations* of prejudice and racism (Goodman, 2010; Van Dijk, 1992),

as the norm against prejudice is presented as victimising majority groups because it curtails their freedom of speech and shuts down legitimate debates (Goodman and Burke, 2010). Those who do make accusations of racism are open to criticism for what Lewis (2004) describes as 'playing the race card' and for being unfair. It has also been shown that public online discussions (in this case, those on the popular website Facebook) can contain examples of talk that display no regard for or orientation to the norm against prejudice, and instead can be seen as examples of 'old', unguarded prejudice where very few of the strategies outlined by Augoustinos and Every (2007) are used (Burke and Goodman, 2012). What this means is that discursive literature has demonstrated that (a) Gypsies can be presented in a particularly negative and prejudicial light and (b) online forums can be arenas for discussions that contain a reduced or absent norm against prejudice. Therefore, an analysis of discussion forums about Gypsies promises to be a fertile source of unguarded race talk. The purpose of this article is therefore to build upon the discursive literature on the presentation of Gypsies, while also focusing on the ways in which talk about prejudice and race are managed in this setting.

## Procedure

The data in this report come from a larger project, which to our knowledge is the first discursive research study addressing the ways in which Gypsies are presented in the UK (see Rowe and Goodman, in press). Initial analysis of the data identified dehumanising talk about Gypsies; however, it was also noted that there was some interesting talk about what is meant by prejudice and racism in the data, which is analysed in detail here. The data itself consisted of three internet discussion forums. The first of these followed an article on *The Independent* newspaper's website, entitled 'No Blacks, no dogs, no Gypsies',<sup>2</sup> which highlights the prejudicial treatment of Gypsies in the UK. The second forum followed an article on the website 'Foreigners in the UK', entitled 'Gypsy child thieves: Controversy over BBC documentary',<sup>3</sup> which responded to the BBC documentary 'Gypsy child thieves'<sup>4</sup> and argued that the documentary unfairly, and prejudicially, represented Gypsies. The third forum followed an article on *The Sun* newspaper's website, entitled 'Paradise lost to JCB gypsies',<sup>5</sup> which described the local response to Gypsies laying the foundations for a permanent caravan site; this article appears to be anti-Gypsy in a similar vein to the articles identified by Bowers (2010). The data represents 'naturalistic data' (Potter, 1997), which means that it occurred in the public sphere free from any researcher intervention. Data was collected in the summer of 2010 and the comments themselves were left between May 2009 and June 2010.

The posts are presented here as they appeared in the original posts so any spelling or grammatical errors remain. The only alteration is that line numbers have been added to aid the analysis. Links are given to the original forum sites (although *The Independent* forum is no longer available to view). As this is a (critical) discursive analysis (e.g. Augoustinos and Every, 2007), attention is paid to what is accomplished by the comments in the discussion forums, rather than using them as ways of trying to assess what the contributors may or may not think, following the discursive psychological ideal of addressing 'action, not cognition' (Edwards and Potter, 1992: 154). As this analysis gives specific attention to the ways in which 'racism' and 'prejudice' are explicitly topicalised

and managed, extracts were chosen based on explicit arguments about these concepts being used. Therefore, the extracts featured in this analysis are all of those that contain explicit references to, and include arguments about, 'race', 'racism' or 'prejudice'. This does not mean that those extracts where racism and prejudice are not mentioned definitely do not contain any prejudice or racism (Rowe and Goodman (in press) address this in more detail), but it does mean that the analysis gives attention only to those examples where participants in the debate specifically make this the topic.

## Analysis

Three distinct ways of talking about racism and prejudice were identified: (1) making direct accusations of racism, (2) responding to accusations of racism and (3) attempts to reposition racism. Each of these will be addressed in turn.

### *Direct accusations of racism*

This first section of the analysis addresses the ways in which direct accusations of racism were made in the discussion forums. The first of these extracts contains a suggestion that the article the forum is about was designed to increase racism towards Gypsies.

Extract 1: Foreigners in the UK, #43 Lilor, 01/04/2011 15:46

1. I'm not exactly sure what the purpose of this article? To stop crime? or to create
2. racism? In my opinion this article only serves to create hatred and racism, which will
3. create further isolation and joblessness ... isn't that the reason for crime in the first
4. place? Racism, joblessness and isolation? Jobs are not available for Gypsies and it
5. will not be available in the future either because articles like this one ... so what's left?
6. Instead of concentrating on creating hatred, why not help these people? Anyway these
7. type of stories are made up by Liviu Tipurita, a Jewish man who is well known for his
8. hatred against Gypsies as he is from Romania and he will do anything to cut a movie
9. together to make the Gypsies look bad ... Liviu Tipurita should be in jail ... why isn't he?
10. or is he making his leaving from racism? You should list all the crimes that is done by
11. different nationalities and races, including Jewish people ... let's see if it will be
12. available for debate or just be removed ... There are many Jewish criminals and it will
13. not be written 'Jewish Crime' because it would only create hatred ... right?

This post contains accusations that the article the forum is about is racist and that it will serve to increase racial hatred. The extract begins with rhetorical questions that are designed to present the purpose of the article as to increase racial hatred. The first rhetorical question challenges the purpose of the article (line 1) and then two alternative answers are given for this – the first is that it is to reduce crime, which would have positive connotations. However, the second possible answer, which is favoured both by presenting it last (Atkinson, 1984) and by elaborating on the ways in which this is deemed to be true, is that it is designed to create racism. The elaboration that follows takes the form of being in the writer's 'opinion'. The writer then goes on to account for why Gypsies may commit more crime (which means that the association with Gypsies and

crime is accepted here, although here crime is blamed on deprivation, isolation and, importantly, racism (line 2)). Rather than aligning with the position that it is acceptable to brand Gypsies as criminals, it is racism that is used to account for this behaviour. The remainder of the post is concerned with the person who the stories (being discussed in the article) are attributed to, a figure<sup>6</sup> who is presented as racist through the claim that he hates (line 8) Gypsies and so is motivated to present them in a negative light. Finally, the writer finishes the post with a comment which uses the strategy of swapping the talk about Gypsies for another minority group (in this case Jews, who can be identified as receiving the most extreme outcome of racial prejudice) and attempting to demonstrate how this would be deemed unacceptable for any other group (as Bowers, 2010 did), a strategy that serves to highlight that the representation of Gypsies is unfair. In the following extract, taken from the same discussion forum, the writer 'UK Gypsy' explicitly labels other posts to the forum as racist.

Extract 2: Foreigners in the UK, #8 uk gypsy, 02/03/2010 16:28

1. Well just read the comment's below and find them highly racist im a uk born roma run a
2. company pay my tax's and dont steal from nobody, i no hundreds of gypsy's in the uk
3. who are the same. There are romany people all over the world and in some country's are
4. oppressed into a life they cannot climb out of there for having and im meen having to do
5. anything to serve after all that's human nature ... The comment's that have just been left
6. if any other race read them aimed at them they would be getting prosecuted for racism
7. :shock:

The extract begins with a direct reference to previous comments and so can be viewed as a direct interaction with them, and clearly labels them as 'racist' (line 1). This accusation is upgraded by being preceded by the term 'highly', which serves to show that there is no room for discussion about whether or not this is the case. The writer then draws on her/his own identity as being a British Roma. The writer, however, presents a non-stereotypical account of what it is to be a Roma by referring to their own status as someone who runs a company and contributes a fair share to the country (reference to paying taxes). The direct rejection of being a thief (line 2) serves to suggest that this association has become common knowledge, to the extent that Romanies have an interactional requirement to deny such an identity.

The writer then goes on to explain the difficulties that Romany people have to deal with (which supports the literature addressed before this analysis, e.g. Ellis and McWhirter, 2008). Next, the writer uses the strategy identified in the previous post, in suggesting that racist talk about Gypsies is more acceptable than racist talk aimed at other groups; indeed, he/she suggests that had these comments been aimed at any other group then their authors would be in breach of anti-racism laws. As with the previous extract, this helps to position Gypsies as the victims of more extreme racist discrimination than other groups. The post is completed with the single word 'shock' (line 7) surrounded by colons for emphasis. This final statement serves to highlight the unacceptable nature of the comments made within the forum. The next extract, the last one in this section, is taken from the forum on *The Sun's* website and also contains a direct accusation of racism.

Extract 3: *The Sun*, *bessie83*

1. What a racist bunch of idiots. Gypsies are recognised as a distinct ethnic minority! GOD
2. FORBID they build on land they own! Is this not what people do with land they own.
3. God forbid they would want basic sanitation for their children and washing facilities. Of
4. course they pay road tax and insurance on cars, im sure gypsies have to abide by laws
5. like anyone else. The ignorant attitudes on this forum are appalling and enrage me!!

This post begins with an explicit and insulting (Burke and Goodman, 2012) accusation directed at all those who have posted on this discussion forum before. Here, the racism is presented as self-evident and as unacceptable, to the extent that it is worthy of insulting people who have made such comments because it so strongly violates the norm against prejudice (Billig, 1988). After the initial comment, the writer goes on to account for why these comments are deemed to be so offensive by presenting Gypsies as an ethnic minority. It therefore follows that members of ethnic minorities are constructed as people who should be protected from racism, a point that is emphasised through the use of the exclamation mark (line 1). The writer then goes on to suggest that Gypsies should be free to build on their own land, a point that is made with the sarcastic use of the phrase ‘god forbid’, which is emphasised through the use of capitals (which tends to denote shouting in an online setting). A rhetorical question is used to suggest that Gypsies building on their own land is reasonable. An appeal to the interests of Gypsy children presents a moral argument for the rights of Gypsies, similar to that identified in the support of asylum seekers though the use of appeals to supporting families (Goodman, 2007). As with the previous extract, Gypsies are presented as being law-abiding citizens (line 4) who make a positive contribution to their country through the paying of taxes. The post ends by accusing those deemed to be making ‘racist’ comments of being ignorant, which is a common feature of more direct accusations of racism in an online setting (Burke and Goodman, 2012). These posts are presented in a very negative light (‘appalling’, line 5) and are deemed worthy of a negative emotional response.

This section of analysis has therefore shown that in these forums there are examples of direct accusations of racism directed at those opposing Gypsies. The next section, however, demonstrates the ways in which other participants in the forums respond to such accusations.

### *Responding to accusations of racism*

This next section begins with a direct response to the previous extract, in which making accusations of racism is strongly criticised.

Extract 4: *The Sun*, *Thicko*

1. Bessie83 – You are clearly the ignorant one here. Branding people racist is so pathetic
2. and old.

This extract begins by directly addressing ‘bessie83’, the poster responsible for the previous extract. The writer here takes issue with the reference to ignorance (extract 3,



line 5) and turns it round so that *bessie83* is presented as ignorant instead. The reason for this counter claim comes next, in the charge that making accusations of racism is problematic (here, 'pathetic' and 'old'). This post therefore clearly demonstrates an example of the orientation to accusations of racism as problematic (e.g. Goodman, 2010). It is noteworthy that the writer here doesn't engage with any of *bessie83*'s other arguments that are based around a more positive and sympathetic portrayal of Gypsies; it is only the explicit accusation that is singled out for criticism. This adds further weight to the existence of a taboo on making accusations of racism; indeed, in this post the lack of awareness of this taboo displayed in the previous post is used as the grounds to challenge and insult the author of the accusation. The next extract, from *The Independent*, contains a more detailed criticism of accusations of racism.

Extract 5: *The Independent*, kuma2000, 26/02/2010 01.40pm

1. I always find this politically correct bollocks to be annoying. The 'Travellers' who have
2. made my life hell in the past have been white like me and I have no idea where their
3. origin is. People hate them because they are a bunch of thieves who have a disregard to
4. other people and the law. Their visits around my previous homes and workplaces have
5. left children's playing fields and areas of natural beauty strewn with debris and waste
6. and local homes hit by a mini crimewave. Their colure or where they are from is
7. completely beside the point, there is no racism here.

This post begins with the writer, 'kuma2000', criticising the *Independent* article that the discussion forum is about. The article, entitled 'No Blacks, no dogs, no Gypsies', begins with the line 'Gypsies and Travellers in the UK are uniting to form a nationwide coalition to fight what they describe as rapidly escalating levels of racism and discrimination',<sup>7</sup> which can be seen as a general accusation of racism, and it is 'racism' that has become the title of this part ('thread') of the discussion forum. The writer refers to the article as being 'politically correct bollocks' (line 1), which demonstrates that the notion of political correctness is tied up with accusations of racism, so that the two can be criticised together (Scott, 1992). The use of 'bollocks'<sup>8</sup> to insinuate nonsense dramatises the remark, making it seem more striking and vivid. After making this initial claim, the writer goes on to give a personal account of the difficulties s/he has purportedly suffered at the hands of Travellers. It is noteworthy that the category 'Travellers' (line 1) is placed in quotation marks in a way that questions this description (Van Dijk, 1993) and potentially serves to present these people as illegitimate. Once again, Travellers are presented as problematic through an association with crime (lines 3, 4 and 6).

While the purpose of this post is to deny racism, the writer does mention hatred towards Travellers. It is therefore suggested that hatred towards Gypsies can and does exist without, or separately from, racism. The point about hatred is made by speaking on behalf of other, unspecified people (line 3), which is an interesting footing (Goffman, 1981) as it means that the writer doesn't have to align with feeling hatred her/himself. The final sentence of the post begins with a claim that the colour (line 6) of Travellers is irrelevant; this is therefore a clear case of 'discursive deracialisation' (Augoustinos and Every, 2007) as there is a direct attempt to show that the strong opposition displayed in

the post has nothing to do with race. This point is supported by the claim that, like colour, the group's place of origin is also not the motivation for the opposition towards them. The post then ends with an explicit denial that this opposition is about racism, and the use of 'here' may refer to the wider discussion forum, in which case this is also an example of denying racism on behalf of others (Condor et al., 2006), and shows a clear orientation to the norm against prejudice (Billig, 1988).

This section has shown that participants go to rhetorical lengths to both deny racism and to suggest that making accusations of racism is problematic and unacceptable, while there is an explicit acceptance that there is hatred, and no attempt to deny that there is prejudice, directed towards Gypsies.

### *Repositioning racism as prejudice*

In this final section of analysis, it can be seen how attempts are made to reposition racism as something different. These final two extracts follow directly on from the previous extract with the first responding to it and the second being a reply from the writer of the previous extract. In the first extract, the writer takes issue with kuma2000's attempt to remove the label of racism from talk about Gypsies as well as other posts on the forum.

Extract 6: *The Independent*, Rabbitlug, 26/02/2010 06.03pm

1. Not racism. Just simple extreme prejudice.
2. I look at the above comments and substitute 'Gypsy' for 'unemployed person' or
3. 'druggie', or (more typically) 'bankers' pick a sector and despise it, makes you feel
4. superior.

In this extract, the writer, 'Rabbitlug', responds to the previous attempt to deny racism. This begins with an agreement that opposition to Gypsies is not racist (line 1). Directly after this very brief agreement, the writer states that it is 'extreme prejudice' (line 1). The preceding term, 'Just simple' (see Goodman and Burke, 2010), suggests that what is to follow – in this case prejudice – is basic and problematic, something that supports the suggestion that any prejudice is irrational (Edwards, 2003). While there is a concession that the opposition to Gypsies isn't racist, which allows the writer to appear reasonable, the suggestion that this opposition is extremely prejudicial is nevertheless a serious criticism that aligns with the norm against prejudice. What this means is that while the writer is willing to acknowledge that opposition to Gypsies does not signify racism, it is still presented as unreasonable and unwarranted. Following on from this complaint, the writer then uses the strategy seen earlier in this analysis – that of replacing the term 'Gypsy' with another minority group to highlight how unacceptable similar comments about other groups would be, although in this case examples of other socially criticised groups (lines 2 and 3) rather than ethnic minorities are used. The post ends with the writer's attempt at accounting for this extreme prejudice, which is that finding a scapegoat may make people feel better.

What this strategy shows is that there may be an acceptance that opposition to Gypsies isn't racist, but that this opposition is still wrong, which shows that there is an orientation

to the norm against prejudice despite the criticisms of accusations of racism seen in the previous section. The next extract contains the response to this extract, in which racism is once again denied, while prejudice towards Gypsies is not denied; instead it is accepted.

Extract 7: *The Independent*, kuma2000, 26 February 2010 07.03pm

1. Maybe it is prejudice. But its prejudice derived from experience not hearsay. But it is
2. NOT racism. That is throwing in a buzzword that is designed to provoke a reaction of
3. denial, you could do the same thing by saying 'all people who hate Travellers are
4. paedophiles' and get a similar immediate reaction. My multiple experiences of different
5. Traveller groups found them to be people who have a complete disregard for the people
6. around them. They expect us to provide free campsites for them and to pay to clean
7. up the filth and mess they leave around our houses and workplaces when they decide
8. to leave and to turn a blind eye to the things that go coincidentally go missing when
9. they are around.

This extract begins with a partial acceptance of the suggestion that opposition to Gypsies is prejudiced. This is signalled through the term 'maybe', which is a hedging term that neither fully denies nor confirms that this is the case. However, the next sentence does concede that this opposition is caused by prejudice (signalled through the 'but'), which changes the meaning of the previous 'Maybe' to an acceptance. This prejudice is accounted for in a way that is designed to present the speaker as rational rather than bigoted, on the grounds of 'experience' (line 1), which is a difficult thing for others to argue against. What this means is that prejudice based on 'hearsay' (line 1) is irrational and wrong, whereas prejudice based on experience is understandable and acceptable. Interestingly, this statement is followed by an explicit denial that this opposition is racist, which is emphasised through the capitalisation of 'NOT' (line 2).

As in the previous section of this analysis, accusations of racism are presented as unreasonable (Goodman, 2010; Van der Valk, 2001); indeed more so than experience-informed prejudice. Accusations of racism are presented as a simplistic way of making a point and gaining a 'reaction' (line 2) that requires a denial (line 3); as is demonstrated in this extract and throughout the analysis, it is the case that *accusations* of racism require a denial (Augoustinos and Every, 2007; Billig, 1988). The reference to 'buzzword' (line 2) suggests that these accusations are simplistic and easy to make, but that they are also unwarranted. After this criticism, the writer goes on to liken accusations of racism to accusations of being a sex offender (line 4), something which it is claimed would also require a denial. While it is the case that there is a norm against paedophilia as there is against racism, by drawing a comparison between the two it is suggested that racism is a baseless and unfair accusation to make, one that will be damaging to those it is directed at; the implication here is that accusations of racism are made in situations (such as those where groups such as Gypsies are criticised) where there are no grounds for making such claims. Here, the 'racism' is removed from opposition to minority groups.

As in kuma2000's previous post (extract 5), a number of reasons for taking issue with Gypsies, based on personal experience, are given in extract 7. Gypsies (here 'Travellers') are presented as the unreasonable group because they are said to have no regard for others. They are presented as freeloading (line 6) and dirty (line 7) and as thieves (lines

8–9). Throughout this post, an ‘us and them’ distinction is used to position Gypsies as very different from, and worse than, settled communities. All through the post, although racism is denied, it is conceded that opposition is due to prejudice (albeit prejudice grounded in personal experience) and Gypsies are nevertheless presented in a particularly negative way.

## Discussion

This analysis has identified three different ways of talking about racism in relation to opposition to Gypsies. The first is that opposition to Gypsies is presented as racist; the second is that these accusations are responded to through denials and criticisms of making accusations; the third is that opposition to Gypsies is presented as being based on prejudice, but not on racism.

In the first section, it was shown that what has been described as the norm against prejudice (Billig, 1988) was operating so that the harsh treatment and criticism of Gypsies can be labelled as problematic and, in particular, racist. This norm was invoked by contributors to the forum who were arguing for a more positive stance towards Gypsies. Here, racism, hatred and discrimination are presented as extremely negative and as the grounds on which to justify anger, shock and resistance. There is no direct reference to ‘prejudice’ in these posts. A common feature of these accusations is to draw parallels with talk about other minority groups and to argue that the ways in which Gypsies are spoken about would be considered unacceptable if they were about any other minority groups (and particular ethnic minority groups). In this way, the norm against prejudice to other groups is invoked to bolster the strength of a norm against prejudice towards Gypsies.

In the second section of analysis, it was shown how contributors to the forums deal directly with such accusations of racism in a way that presents the accusations as unwarranted and unfair. In these cases, accusations are presented as problematic because they are baseless insults that prevent proper engagement with an issue. These posts contain counter insults (such as ignorance, being pathetic and annoying) but they contain no rhetorical efforts to suggest that there isn’t prejudice or hatred directed towards Gypsies, with one example suggesting that there *is* hatred towards them. This means that it is only ‘racism’ that is rejected, not hatred or prejudice. So while the label ‘racism’ is strongly rejected, there is a relative lack of orientation to the norm against prejudice as hatred and prejudice towards Gypsies remain unchallenged; indeed, there are examples of common features of prejudicial representations of Gypsies, such as suggestions that they are different, dirty and criminal (e.g. Rowe and Goodman, in press; Tileaga, 2006).

It is the final section that contains the most striking finding, which is that there is acceptance that opposition to Gypsies may indeed be due to prejudice, but explicitly not racism. This suggests a hierarchy of opposition to out-groups whereby racism is the most extreme form. This is signalled by all posts containing orientations to racism as problematic, either something worthy of making an accusation about, or where an accusation is made it is dealt with as unwarranted and unfair. No posts contain an acceptance that the writer is racist, or any suggestion that racism is acceptable; there is therefore clear evidence in this data of a norm against *racism*. However, next in this hierarchy comes

prejudice, something oriented to as less severe than racism (even when it is 'extreme') and something that is not denied. Within the final extract in this analysis, there is a distinction (see Billig, 1985) made between prejudice based on 'hearsay' and that based on experience, so in this data the hierarchy seems to be racism, hearsay prejudice and experience-informed prejudice. It is this experience-informed prejudice that is presented as acceptable and something that doesn't require a denial. The lack of rhetorical work to deny prejudice towards Gypsies could demonstrate that prejudice against Gypsies is socially acceptable.

Acknowledging prejudice in the service of denying racism is a novel finding. This has implications for (social) psychologists in general as well as for discourse analysts and has practical implications. In terms of social psychologists generally, this suggests that it is important to make a proper distinction between prejudice and racism, even where issues of race/racism may be implicated (as is the case with Gypsies). A failure to do so may mean missing subtle nuances between the two, and as speakers problematise this potential conflation (by particularising prejudice and racism; see Billig, 1985) it is important that psychologists are aware of this. For discourse analysts, this suggests that the 'taboo on prejudice' may not be entirely without challenge. The findings of this research suggest that while there does appear to be a taboo against racism (although as seen elsewhere, e.g. Goodman and Burke, 2010, this is explicitly criticised), there is *no* taboo against prejudice in operation here. The combination of the removal of the taboo against prejudice and the criticism of accusations of racism suggests the status of talk about prejudice and race is in a state of flux. The changing status of the taboo against racism means that there are new ways of arguing for the mistreatment of weak and marginalised groups that function to deny racism and deem prejudice to be a less serious problem, which may have real-life implications for members of those groups. For these reasons, it is suggested that future studies investigate how this distinction is used (if at all) in a wider range of settings.

## Concluding remarks

These findings have major implications for the discursive literature on prejudice and racism. While the taboo against prejudice (Billig, 1988) has remained a consistent and robust finding throughout discursive psychology, this research has shown that in the specific context of discussion forums about Gypsies in the UK, the taboo against prejudice does not seem to operate. Instead, there is a hierarchy of prejudices where only racism is deemed too extreme to acknowledge (Van Dijk, 1993), while prejudice towards Gypsies is not denied but rather is presented as an inevitable outcome given the actions of Gypsies themselves. This means that while there is still a taboo in place, the taboo is only against racism, which is presented as the most extreme form of opposition (Van Dijk, 1993), rather than prejudice and hatred, which are deemed acceptable here. While there is evidence of criticism of posts that are deemed to be racist, which suggests that displays of hatred towards Gypsies are not universally accepted, accusations of racism are criticised and deemed to be problematic (as demonstrated elsewhere, e.g. Goodman, 2010), which allows extremely prejudicial comments to be directed at Gypsies.

This in turn has worrying implications for the treatment of Gypsies, who have been shown to be a particularly vulnerable group of people. This finding therefore supports the suggestion that a level of prejudice that would not normally be accepted towards minority groups is commonplace when discussing Gypsies. It appears that when it comes to Gypsies, the norm against prejudice is suspended so that this talk is an example of ‘discourse that denies, rationalizes and excuses the dehumanization and marginalization of, and discrimination against’ (Every and Augoustinos, 2007: 412) Gypsies, much to the detriment of this group and those who campaign for their rights. In order to attempt to counter their harsh treatment, further research is needed to determine the extent to which prejudice against Gypsies has become acceptable.

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## Notes

1. For more about this case, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-esssex-15738149>
2. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/no-blacks-no-dogsno-gypsies-860873.html> (at the time of writing, the comments accompanying the article are no longer accessible).
3. See [http://www.foreignersinuk.co.uk/blog-videoblog-gypsy\\_child\\_thieves\\_controversy\\_over\\_bbc\\_documentary\\_1383.html](http://www.foreignersinuk.co.uk/blog-videoblog-gypsy_child_thieves_controversy_over_bbc_documentary_1383.html)
4. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00mkjyd>
5. See <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article2446669.ece>
6. It is of note that the individual’s Jewish status is foregrounded here.
7. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/no-blacks-no-dogsno-gypsies-860873.html>
8. This term is used in British slang/swearing to denote that something is bad, stupid and/or untrue.

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