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“Nasty Question” and “Fake News”: Metadiscourse as a Resource for Denying Accusations of Racism in Donald Trump’s Presidential Press Events

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how Trump uses metadiscourse as a strategy for denying accusations of racism. We conduct a discourse analysis of press event interactions where Trump denies journalists’ accusations of racism or where Trump himself voices others’ accusations of racism and then denies these accusations. Analysis of 8 excerpts illustrates how Trump a) uses metadiscourse to reframe his own talk as “accurate” instead of “racist,” b) uses “fake news” as humor to delegitimize media and display amicable relationships with his African American supporters and c) labels questions from journalists who ask about his racist actions as “racist” or “nasty.” These metadiscursive strategies reproduce racist ideologies that position Trump as well intentioned, not racist, and thus not blame-worthy for racist actions and those who question Trump as unreasonable and sometimes, racist themselves. Thus, Trump uses his authority to control definitions of what counts as racism and is able to perpetuate racism while attempting to maintain a “not-racist” identity. Overall, we highlight how close analysis of forms of metadiscourse as used in particular interactional and relational contexts is consequential for understanding ways that racism is justified and maintained more broadly.

KEYTERMS:

denials of racism;
face-work;
ideology;
metadiscourse;
Trump

Introduction

Former United States President Donald Trump is notable for demonizing racial minority groups, promoting values that appeal to his white nationalist base, and then denying that he is racist and that racism is a problem in the United States (Kendi, 2020). This paper analyzes Trump’s strategies for denying racism. People use denials of racism to avoid being held accountable for their own racist words or actions or to deny that racism exists, yet do so in ways that maintain a reasonable, not racist identity for themselves (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Foster, 2009; van Dijk, 1992). Discursive strategies used to deny racism include using disclaimers (e.g., “I’m not racist but”) prior to negatively evaluating minority groups (van Dijk, 1992), framing claims that racism exists as absurd overgeneralizations (Shrikant, 2020a), using examples of happy,

successful minorities to argue that racism is not a problem (Verkuyten, 2003), citing cross-racial friendships as evidence that individuals are not racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2003), or explaining away instances of racism as individual aberrations from an otherwise equal society (Bucholtz 2010; Hill, 2008; Shrikant, 2020a).

These everyday denials are dangerous because they reproduce racist ideologies, or “common-sense assumptions” about racism, that maintain status quo inequalities among white and minority groups (Fairclough, 1989, p. 2). Strategies that deny racism perpetuate ideologies of post-racialism (racism is no longer a problem), colorblindness (racial inequality is not a product of racism, but of economic or cultural factors), or folk ideology (actions are not racist unless the perpetrator *intends* to be hateful) (Alim & Reyes, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Hill, 2008; Hodges, 2015; Shrikant, 2020a). These ideologies deny the reality noted by critical race theorists: racism is an ordinary, ongoing project that maintains the privileged position of whiteness and the marginalized positions of racial minority groups (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Omi & Winant, 2014), and everyday communication acts as ideological discourse that upholds this racist status quo (Flores, 2018). Furthermore, since Trump was a political elite, his language use circulates publicly as an authoritative voice that helps “construct the dominant white consensus” about race and racism (van Dijk, 1992, p. 89). Thus, analyzing the ways Trump accomplishes denials of racism in different interactional contexts is an important lens through which we can examine communicating race in the United States.

We add to previous literature through analyzing how *metadiscourse* is used for denying accusations of racism, and how these uses of metadiscourse contribute to the reproduction of racist ideologies. Metadiscourse, or talk about talk, is a relatively ubiquitous discursive strategy that achieves a variety of aims (Craig, 2008; Schiffrin, 1980), yet has been underexplored as it relates to ways it is used to deny or minimize racism (c.f. Billig, 2001; Shrikant, 2020a). The data we analyze include interactions where Trump denies journalists’ accusations of racism or where Trump himself voices others’ accusations of racism and then denies these accusations. Taking a discourse analytic approach, we focus on the different *forms of metadiscourse* Trump uses when denying accusations of racism, *when during the sequence of a particular interaction* he uses these forms of metadiscourse, and how metadiscourse *shapes or is shaped by immediate interactional and relational contexts*. We then discuss how Trump’s situated use of metadiscourse to deny racism has implications for the reproduction of more widely circulating racist ideologies.

Discourse analysis and denying accusations of racism

We use discourse analysis to illustrate how reproduction of racist ideologies is grounded in the particulars of everyday discursive choices that occur in specific interactional and relational contexts. Discourse analytic approaches focus on what people “do” through interaction (e.g., deny racism) and the discursive strategies used to accomplish these actions (Gordon, 2015). Our analysis focuses on how Trump uses metadiscourse to construct denials in response to accusations of racism.

Accusations, more broadly, are assertions that someone has done something wrong and imply this person is blameworthy for those actions (Castor, 2015). Typically, participants orient to preference for agreement as an interactional norm, responding to the previous person in ways that agree or align with what they say (Pomerantz, 1984). When responding to accusations, however, agreeing with the previous speaker would involve accepting the charge of wrongdoing, and therefore be face-threatening. Face is an interactional phenomenon – through communication we save face or threaten our own or others’ faces – and a social phenomenon – what people orient to as positive depends on the kinds of identities valued in a particular situation (Arundale, 2006; Tracy, 2008). When responding to accusations, agreeing with the accuser or not producing a response to an accusation are often interpreted as acceptance of the charges put forward in an accusation (Atkinson & Drew, 1979). Thus, people often reply to accusations through denials, justifications, excuses, counter-accusations, or apologies that do not fully accept blame.

Previous studies documenting denials of racism illustrate that participants orient to “being a racist” as a face-threatening identity and therefore design denials strategically in ways that allow them to say racist things, yet avoid being labeled as racist (e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2007; van den berg et al., 2003; van Dijk 1992). For example, van Dijk (1992) argues that denials that precede racist discourse (e.g., “I’m not racist but...”) discourage other participants from assigning the speaker a racist identity while allowing the speaker to say racist things. In this study, we analyze how Trump responds to accusations of racism. More specifically, we focus on how Trump uses metadiscourse when denying accusations of racism.

Metadiscourse and denying racism

Metadiscourse occurs when participants comment on their own or others’ talk (Craig, 2008). Forms of metadiscourse include labeling your own or others’ talk, taking affective stances toward talk, describing talk, parodying another’s talk, or using reported speech where a speaker quotes themselves or someone else and in doing so displays their stance toward this quote (Buttny, 2010; Leighter & Black, 2010; Sclafani 2018; Shrikant, 2020b; Sierra 2019, 2021). Commenting on or quoting someone else’s discourse allows participants to make past discourse from themselves or others relevant in a current interaction and to reframe its meanings to accomplish new interactional aims (Sierra 2016, 2021; Sierra & Shrikant 2020; Tannen 2006). Sometimes participants use metadiscourse following a problematic statement to name that statement and evaluate it and its speaker as requiring accountability for violating some sort of social or institutional norm (Buttny, 2010; Shrikant, 2020b; Sierra 2019, 2021).

In addition to interactional functions of holding others accountable, studies have shown that metadiscourse has indexical functions (Gordon & Luke, 2016; Leighter & Black, 2010; Martínez Guillem 2009; Sclafani 2018). In other words, the choice of wording in metadiscourse points to locally shared meanings. Leighter and Black (2010), for example, examine the use of “I’m just raising a question” in public meetings about water conservation and show that the phrase indexes shared knowledge that the issue at hand needs further discussion by the group. Martínez Guillem (2009) argues that

metadiscourse can “invoke knowledge about both the ongoing interaction and other past or future communicative events” (Martínez Guillem, 2009, p. 743). In political discourse, for example, politicians often incorporate quotes from policies or other politicians, which displays their shared knowledge with the public about events and communication that have taken place outside of a current interactional context. In relation to Trump and metadiscourse, Sclafani (2018) claims that Donald Trump did not supply responses involving any type of metadiscourse during the 2016 Republican presidential debates. This might correlate with perceptions about his speaking style as “decisive” or “straight-forward” in the debate context, or, alternatively, as unaccommodating to the moderator. In the present study, however, we find that Trump does use metadiscourse, specifically as a strategy for denying racism in press events.

Few studies have examined metadiscourse as a strategy for denying racism. Billig (2001) and Shrikant (2020a) show how metadiscourse that denies racism helps to *avoid being held accountable* for problematic actions (instead of holding others accountable). For example, Billig’s (2001) analysis of humor in Ku Klux Klan (an overtly white supremacist organization in the United States) message boards shows that participants added the metadiscourse, “it’s just a joke” to label their racist humor as harmless. Shrikant (2020a) shows how neighbors accused of racism during an online discussion use metadiscourse to frame the online medium as “a lousy place” to discuss issues like racism, thus negating their own responsibility for their previous racist posts. Alternatively, Robles (2015), illustrates how extreme case re-formulations, where participants repeat another’s racist comment, jokingly, in a more extreme way, function to call out a speaker’s racist utterance and encourage them to explain or change it. In this case, metadiscourse is used in ways to hold someone else accountable for racism while attempting to maintain face for all parties involved.

These studies, in addition to highlighting relations between metadiscourse and social accountability during racism, also point toward the ideological functions of using metadiscourse to deny racism. For example, metadiscourse can perpetuate ideologies of hatred and dehumanization (Billig, 2001), folk ideologies that utterances are only racist if individuals intend them to be so (Billig, 2001; Shrikant, 2020a), or resist racist ideologies through bringing attention to problematic assumptions embedded in racist utterances (Robles, 2015). In this study, we examine how Trump uses metadiscourse to deny racism during press conference interactions and the ideological consequences of this metadiscourse.

Political discourse and denying racism

Discourse analytic research highlights interactional sequences and relationships that are distinct to press conference interactions. These studies analyze question-answer sequences and how they provide insight into “the evolving relationship between journalists, politicians, and the institutions that they represent” (Clayman, 2006, p. 563). Some research highlights press conference interactions as contentious, focusing specifically on how journalists’ question design ranges from open questions allowing politicians leeway in their answers to hostile questions that overtly criticize politicians and force politicians to account for the named wrongdoings (see Orr, 1980; Clayman

& Heritage, 2002). Other studies focus on the more affiliative qualities of press conferences (Bhatia, 2006; Ekström, 2009). Ekström (2009), for example, examines how interruptions, jokes, and laughter can build appearances of “friendly” relations between a president and attending reporters. Thus, ways that denials of racism are produced cannot be separated from the surrounding utterances by other participants and the associated contentious or cordial relationships among politicians and journalists or audiences.

Discursive strategies used during political interactions also serve functions that are distinct to political contexts. Research focusing on denials in political discourse highlights how politicians’ denials are closely connected to blame avoidance (Hansson, 2015; Harter et al., 2000; Kampf, 2009; Lynch & Stuckey, 2017; van Dijk, 1992; Wodak, 2015). Politicians’ denials during political discourse “are aimed at altering the perception of the blame taker’s agency” (Hansson, 2015, p. 302). These denials include denying they did an action, denying they did an action *on purpose*, denying negative intent behind their action, or denying their involvement through shifting the blame to another party. Wodak (2015) illustrates intersections between denial and racism in political discourse when showing how right-wing European politicians say or do anti-Semitic things and deny their intent and deny that anti-Semitism exists (going as far as denying the Holocaust altogether). These racist discourses are especially insidious because politicians’ talk circulates publicly as an authoritative, common-sense definition of what counts as racist (van Dijk, 1992; Wodak, 2015).

Overall, previous research on denials of racism, metadiscourse, and political interactions highlight the importance of attending to specifics of interactional and relational contexts *and* of examining broader functions of discursive strategies that extend past a particular interaction or event. However, much of the research focuses on the former or the latter. This paper extends previous approaches through analyzing interactionally specific ways that Trump uses metadiscourse to deny accusations of racism and by discussing consequences of these denials for blame-avoidance and perpetuating racist ideologies. Thus, our analysis points to simultaneous interactional, indexical, and ideological functions of metadiscourse when used to deny racism during political discourse.

Methods

Data selection

We engaged in purposive sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) and selected data that facilitates a deeper exploration of relationships between metadiscourse and denials of racism during political interactions. The data we present here includes eight excerpts where journalists accuse Trump of being racist or saying racist things or where Trump himself orients to accusations from others that he is racist and then denies racism. Each of the presented examples showcases specific ways Trump uses metadiscourse in an interaction and how his use of metadiscourse varies across different interactional and relational contexts. In addition, analyzing our selected data provides insight into strategies that constitute Trump’s distinct language use and interactional style, particularly in regards to racist discourse and press conference interactions (McIntosh & Mendoza-Denton, 2020). Last, each of these examples, or

surrounding events, received notoriety in the news, social media, and were posted on YouTube for public circulation. Thus, the data selected for analysis are examples of broader circulating racist discourse.

The eight excerpts analyzed are from press conferences and other similar public press events featuring former President Donald Trump, such as the 2017 Black History Month Listening Session. While not much on Trump's press conferences has yet emerged in the literature (cf. Tanquary 2020), the Trump administration made marked changes to press conference practice in the White House. First, Trump's presidency held far fewer press conferences than most other recent presidents (e.g., Clinton, Bush, Obama). In addition, Trump conducted press conferences in a distinct way. Reporters representing right-wing media – even “fringe” outlets such as Breitbart News, which has been known to push white nationalist talking points – were given more questions and enjoyed a larger platform than they ever had in the past. At the same time, reporters from mainstream media who were known to ask contentious questions, or who represented media outlets with whom Trump regularly feuded (CNN, CBS, MSNBC, etc.), were systematically ignored during question time and given unideal seating arrangements within the press conference that suppressed their ability to ask questions (Tanquary, 2020). Furthermore, while previous research illustrates how journalists' more adversarial questions function to limit or constrain politicians' answers (e.g., Clayman & Heritage, 2002), Trump is unique in that he staged disruptions of reporters' questions and often refused to answer questions within the bounds set by the reporter. Each of the selected interactions is discussed in more detail throughout the analysis, and links to excerpts are in the Appendix.

Analytic procedure

We use discourse analytic methods for analyzing data (Tracy, 2015). We conducted verbatim transcription of data – including all uhs, ums, and restarts in the data (Craig & Tracy, 2021). We indicated gestures in double parentheses, and brackets indicate overlap in speaking. After transcribing the data, we repeatedly viewed and listened to the interactions with the transcripts, focusing on ways that Trump responded to accusations of racism and the conversational actions that preceded and followed Trump's actions. Although there are many strategies occurring concurrently (some of which we highlight in our analysis), we identified metadiscourse as a strategy that deserved further investigation. In our transcripts, we bolded the metadiscourse on which we center our analysis. Below, we present the context for each interaction followed by a transcription of the interaction. We then conduct a line-by-line analysis of data guided by the following questions: what forms of metadiscourse did Trump use? How does Trump's choice of metadiscourse orient to previous conversational actions and shape future conversational actions from other participants? How does Trump's use of metadiscourse accomplish denial of racism? What other strategies does Trump use when denying racism? How do these discursive strategies orient to face-wants and/or blame-avoidance? In the discussion section, we tease out relationships between Trump's metadiscourse, denials of racism, and the reproduction of racist ideologies.

Analysis

We first present examples where Trump's use of metadiscourse reframes his own talk as "accurate" instead of "racist." We then present examples where Trump makes humorous references to "fake news" among African American supporters to both deny racist accusations from news media and build relationships with his supporters. Last, we show ways that Trump denies racist accusations from reporters through labeling their questions as "racist" and "nasty." Throughout the analysis we also trace how Trump's metadiscourse shifts blame onto other parties in ways that help Trump save face and deny accusations of racism.

"Chinese virus" is an "accurate term": denying racism and blaming China

Analysis of the following examples illustrates how Trump uses metadiscourse to re-label his own actions in ways that deny racist accusations from journalists. In both examples, reporters' questions directly state or imply that Trump calling COVID-19 (Coronavirus disease 2019) the "Chinese virus" is racist, and Trump denies this accusation through re-labeling "Chinese Virus" as an "accurate term" and constructing China as blame-worthy for the term "Chinese virus." The first interaction below is from the White House briefing from the Coronavirus task force on March 18, 2020.

Example 1

1	Reporter	Why do you keep calling this the Chinese virus ? There
2		are reports of dozens of incidents of bi-bias against
3		Chinese Americans in this country? Your own aide,
4		secretary Azar says he does not use this term. He
5		says ethnicity does not cause the virus. Why do you
6		keep using this? [A lot of people say it's racist]
7	Trump	[cuz it comes from China.] It's not
8		racist at all no. Not at all. It comes from. China
9		((stylized, stereotypical pronunciation)). That's why. It
10		comes from China. [I want to be accurate
11	Reporter	[And no concerns about
12		[Chinese Americans in this country
13	Trump	[Yeah please John? Please. ((selecting next reporter))
14	Reporter	(to the b-) aides behind you. [Are you comfortable
15		with this term?]
16	Trump	[No. I have] a great,
17		I have great love uh for all of the people from our
18		country, but uh as you know, China tried to say, at
19		one point, maybe they stopped now, that it was caused
20		by American soldiers. That can't happen. It's not
21		gonna happen, not as long as I'm president. Uh it
22		comes from China.

The reporter questions Trump's repeated use of the term, "Chinese virus," thus drawing attention to Trump's use of this term as problematic and needing to be explained (1). The reporter argues that the term "Chinese virus" is problematic through implying that it is linked to bias against Chinese Americans (2-3). The reporter uses reported speech that she attributes to Trump's "own aide, Secretary Azar" (3-4), which highlights that people aligned with Trump do not use the term and even overtly deny the connection Trump is perceived as constructing between

COVID-19 and Chinese people (“He says ethnicity does not cause the virus,” 5). The reporter restates her question. This is an accountability question (Clayman & Heritage, 2002), that not only asks the president about his past words or actions, but points to them as problematic and as needing to be explained. Thus, this question puts Trump in the position of “having to defend himself” (p. 769). Trump responds to this question directly with “it comes from China” (7). Whereas the reporter constructs “Chinese” as indexing ethnicity and therefore connected to racism against Chinese Americans, Trump constructs “Chinese” as indexing China, the country. Thus, Trump argues that he is not racist, but is simply naming the virus after its place of origin.

Trump’s answer overlaps with the reporter’s overt accusation of racism, which the reporter constructs through metadiscursive reported speech, stating, “a lot of people say it’s racist” (6).¹ Trump addresses this remark through metadiscourse that counters the reporter: “it’s not racist at all no” (8). The addition of “at all” constructs this utterance as an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986). Extreme case formulations such as “everyone,” “forever,” “completely not,” “never,” are often used during arguments to legitimize claims, to defend against accusations from others, and to normalize people’s actions. “No” (8) acts as a third negation. Thus, Trump constructs a strong, direct denial that what he said was racist. Trump repeats that the virus comes from China, twice, followed by metadiscourse that overtly constructs his discourse positively, as “accurate” (10). In the rest of the interaction, Trump shifts the discussion fully away from Chinese Americans to the nation of China: Trump claims he loves all people from this country, the implication being that he loves Chinese Americans (17–18). He then uses reported speech to construct China, the country, as an enemy that spreads false information about American soldiers (18–20), thus shifting from discussions of racism within the US to competition between the nations of the US and China. Thus, China the country is to blame for the origination of the term “Chinese virus,” which is causing “bias” toward “Chinese Americans,” whereas Trump is simply “accurate” and loves all people in the United States.

Analysis of the example below illustrates how the reporter’s question design alters the ways that Trump uses metadiscourse to deny that “Chinese virus” is a problematic, possibly racist term. This example is from a White House Press Conference on March 18, 2020.

Example 2

1	Reporter	China and others have criticized you for using the phrase uh Chinese virus. Uh, how do you feel about
2		that. Are you going to continue using that phrase?
3		
4	Trump	Well China uh was putting out information which was
5		false, that our military gave this to them. That was
6		false. And uh rather than having an argument, I said
7		uh, I have to call it where it came from. It did
8		come from China. So I think it’s a very accurate term,
9		but no I didn’t appreciate the fact that China was
10		saying that our military gave it to them. Our military
11		did not give, give it to anybody.

The reporter's accusation in this example differs in two ways from the previous one: first, the reporter does not overtly name Trump's language use as "racist" and second, the reporter references China as a country and as the main criticizer of Trump, thus opening the door for Trump to talk about the country and not about the racist implications of the phrase "Chinese virus" (since "Chinese" could also point to a specific American ethnicity). The reporter begins his question with a preface, using reported speech to name "China and others" as metadiscursively "criticizing" Trump's use of the phrase, "Chinese virus" (1-2). This is a preface-tilt (Clayman & Heritage, 2002), which is often added before questions to push the respondent to answer in a particular way. The reporter's question, "Uh, how do you feel about that? Are you going to continue using that phrase?" (2-3) puts Trump in the position of needing to answer in a preferred way ("no, I will not use the term") or to explain why he chooses to continue using a problematic term.

Unlike the previous interaction where Trump needed to differentiate between Chinese as an American ethnicity and China as a nation, this reporter provides "China," the nation, as one of the criticizers of Trump's use of the term "Chinese virus." Thus, Trump is able to take up the reporter's use of China when he denies that using "Chinese virus" is problematic. Trump uses the turn-initial discourse marker "well" (Schiffrin 1987) to begin his reply, which signals that he will not be providing a preferred response ("no"), but will instead explain why he chooses to continue using a problematic phrase. Trump proceeds to construct China as a liar through using the metadiscursive label "false" to label any sort of "information" from China. This marks any "criticism" (1) from China as not credible. Trump then uses metadiscourse to construct himself as honest: he "calls it where it came from" (7) and uses a "very accurate term" (8). Trump closes his answer by again constructing China as a liar who spreads false information about "our" (the American) military spreading the virus (9-11). Thus, Trump argues that even if the term "Chinese virus" does seem like it blames China, China *deserves* this blame because the virus originated from there and China tried to lie and say the virus originated in the United States.

"Fake news": denying racism and blaming the media

The following analysis illustrates how Trump voices mainstream media accusations of racism against himself and then uses the metadiscourse "fake news" in a humorous way to both deny that he is racist and to build relationships with his African American supporters in the interaction (Sierra & Shrikant, 2020). These examples are excerpts from the 2017 Black History Month Listening session held by Donald Trump in the White House. Attendees included then President Trump, Vice-President Mike Pence, African Americans in Trump's administration, and African American leaders in industries such as the media, church, military, and private industry. This session gained notoriety in the mainstream media because a) Trump said "Frederick Douglass is an example of somebody who's done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more," thus causing people to question whether Trump is aware that Douglass passed away in the 1800s and b) Trump spent much of the time in this listening session complaining about the media.

Example 3

1	Trump	Last month we celebrated the life of Reverend Martin
2		Luther King, Jr., whose incredible example is unique in
3		American history, You read all about ((shifts eye gaze
4		from reading to speaking to others)) Dr. Martin Luther
5		King uh a week ago when uh somebody said I took the
6		statue out of my office , and it turned out that that
7		was, fake news .
8	Room	((laughter))
9	Trump	From these people ((gestures toward the reporters in the
10		room)) fake news .

Trump starts this interaction through praising prominent African American activist Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK, Jr.). Trump then uses indirect reported speech (Coulmas, 1986), where he synthesizes, instead of directly quoting, discourse from another party. Trump's synthesis the media report makes clear to other participants what specifically from the media report is relevant to the current interaction (the accusation that Trump removed MLK's bust). Trump's metadiscourse also brings third parties into the interaction, presumably the news ("you read about," 3) and the journalist who wrote the article ("somebody said," 5). Through using this reported speech, Trump orients to the media as accusing Trump of possibly being racist because he removed the bust of MLK, Jr. from his office.

Trump displays his stance through metadiscourse labeling the reported speech as "fake news" (7). Fake news was originally used as a term to mark fictitious news stories circulating in news media. However, Trump co-opted this statement, often using it as an accusation against any media he perceived to criticize him. Eventually it became known as one of his catchphrases (Sierra & Shrikant 2020). Trump's use of "fake news" functions as a counter-accusation (Castor, 2015) against the media for reporting false information. Labeling media discourse as "fake news" also denies that Trump is a racist (because he did *not* remove MLK Jr's statue). In addition, "fake news" functions as an intertextual joke, one that builds group identity through using a specialized source to bond the group and invite mutual involvement in the conversation (Sierra 2016, 2019, 2021). "Fake news" used in this humorous way (e.g., Trump pauses before saying it, building up to the punchline of his joke) elicits laughter from his African American supporters in the room because of shared knowledge that this is Trump's catch phrase and is a viewpoint that Trump and his supporters share. This momentary alignment Trump creates with his African American interlocutors contributes to saving face for Trump: Trump is not racist because he did not remove the statue *and* he is liked by these African Americans (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Trump continues with his counter-accusation through pointing to reporters in the room as perpetuating "fake news" (9–10), thus aligning himself with his African American supporters and against the media. Trump constructs the media, therefore, as a third party that is to blame for Trump's seemingly racist actions.

Throughout the rest of the session, Trump continues to use the metadiscourse "fake news" to both criticize the media and build relationships with his African American supporters at the listening session. Below, Trump elicits laughter before the use of "fake news" to characterize CNN's reporting, almost in anticipation of the punch line. Trump's mention of "fake news" is followed by alignment from one of the African

American supporters in the room (not identifiable because the camera was focused on Trump) who declares on behalf of the group that “none of us watch it either anymore” (5).

Example 4

1	Trump	But I don't watch C-N-N so I don't get to see you as
2		much as I (used) to.
3	Room	((laughter))
4	Trump	I don't like watching fake news .
5	?	No- none of us watch it either anymore.

This example again shows a momentary alignment between Trump and one of his supporters who affirms Trump's negative affective stance “I don't like watching fake news” (4) with “none of us watch it either anymore” (5) seemingly speaking on behalf of all the supporters present. “None of us” and “anymore” are extreme case formulations (Pomerantz 1986) used here to normalize Trump's actions and feelings regarding “fake news,” thus again doing face-saving work for Trump.

Analysis of the final example from this event illustrates how conservative commentator Armstrong Williams takes up Trump's humor about mainstream media and the fake news through the metadiscursive resources he uses to describe his own news reporting:

Example 5

1	Williams	Um Mr. President, I'm a-a member of the, Uh- what we
2		call the media, where we try to be fair?
3	Room	((laughter))
4	Williams	and objective .
5	?	Very fair.
6	Williams	Um not all media uh seems to be the opposition party.
7		There are those that see the good that you do and we
8		report it and I'm just honored to have a seat at the
9		table today.
10	Trump	Thank you Armstrong.

Williams uses descriptors of his organization's reporting that positions it in contrast to what this group would expect from the “media”: fair and objective reporting (2, 4). This elicits laughter from other participants, likely recalling Trump's repeated mentions of “fake news.” Armstrong later expands that he reports “the good” that Trump does (7–8), thus implying that fair media should include positive reports about Trump. Trump thanks Armstrong. This excerpt shows Armstrong aligning with Trump by engaging in metadiscourse about the media. Analysis across the three excerpts illustrates that Trump's use of metadiscourse to deny that he is racist is not an individual, but rather a cooperative endeavor. Trump's interlocutors laugh at his jokes, align with him through stating they do not watch fake news, they report on the good that he does, and make their own “fake news” jokes (see also Sierra & Shrikant, 2020).

“Racist,” “nasty” questions: face attacks and avoiding blame

Analysis of the following examples illustrates how journalists ask questions that accuse Trump of saying or doing racist things, and Trump responds by using metadiscourse that accuses the journalists of asking racist questions. Unlike the previous unidentified

“reporters” (examples 1 and 2), we name the reporters in the interactions below: Yamiche Alcindor, Weijia Jiang, and April Ryan. All are women of color who have had several contentious racist interactions with Trump. This relational information helps contextualize the interactions analyzed below. The first example is from an interaction between Trump and PBS News Hour White House Correspondent, Yamiche Alcindor on November 7, 2018. In this excerpt, Trump responds to Yamiche Alcindor’s question about his use of the term “nationalism” through labeling the question as “racist” and “terrible,” thus denying racism through positioning himself as a victim of a racist question.

Example 6

1	Alcindor	Hi Mister President. Yamiche Alcindor with PBS News
2		Hour. Um, on the campaign trail you called yourself a
3		nationalist. Some people saw that as emboldening white
4		nationalists [Now people are also saying] [that the prec-
5		
6	Trump	[(shaking head no)] [I don’t know
7		why you’re saying that. That’s such a rac[ist question.
8		((nods no)) eh
9	Alcindor	[There are
10		some people that say] that now the Republican Party is,
11		seen as supporting white nationalists [because of your
12		rhetoric. What do you make of that?]
13	Trump	[oh I don’t believe
14		that I don’t believe that I don’t believe that] Well
15		just-I don’t know why do I have my highest poll
16		numbers ever with African Americans. Why do I have
17		among the highest poll numbers with African Americans.
18		I mean, why do I have my highest poll numbers. That’s
19		such a racist question. Honestly? I mean, I know you
20		have it written down and you’re gonna tell me-let me
21		tell ya. That’s a racist question.
22	Alcindor	Um Mr. President [can I as-
23	Trump	[I love ((hand stopping motion)), you
24		know what the word is? I love our country, I do. You
25		call, you have nationalists, you have globalists. I
26		also love the world, and I don’t mind helping the
27		world, but we have to straighten out our country first.
28		We have a lot of problems.
29	Alcindor	And Mis-
30	Trump	((hand stopping motion)) Excuse me. But to say that,
31		what you said, is so insulting to me. It’s a very
32		terrible thing that you said.

Alcindor begins a relatively adversarial question, one that attempts to constrain the president’s answer and thus hold him accountable for his actions (Clayman & Heritage, 2002), as indicated through the preface to her question (1–5). Alcindor uses indirect reported speech, voicing Trump as using the term “nationalist” (2–3) and “people” as orienting to Trump’s language as problematic because it emboldens white nationalists (3–4). Alcindor’s use of indirect reported speech can be read as an accusation of racism against Trump. Trump certainly orients to this preface as an accusation, shaking his head no (6) and then cutting off Alcindor mid-question to construct his denial.

Trump's metadiscourse constructs Alcindor as not having a reason for asking this question (I don't know why you're saying that) and follows with a counter-accusation that it is in fact this question that is "racist" and not Trump's remarks (8). van Dijk (1992) shows how counter-accusations are common strategies used to deny racism and often imply minorities as constructing "inverted racism against whites" or "as intolerant and generally as 'seeing racism where there is none'" (p. 90). In this case, Alcindor's accusation of racism becomes positioned as more problematic than the actual racism: Trump's appeal to white nationalists.

Alcindor finishes her question, again using reported speech as a resource to construct Trump's "rhetoric" as appealing to white nationalists (9–12). Alcindor then asks an accountability question (Clayman & Heritage, 2002), one that asks Trump to explain his rhetoric and its potential consequences. Trump answers the question by stating he doesn't believe what "some people" say about his rhetoric and then providing evidence to the contrary: Trump has high poll numbers with African Americans (15–18). Trump then again uses metadiscourse, twice making a counter-accusation that the reporter has asked a "racist question" (18–19, 21). However, he appears to attempt to mitigate the force of this counter-accusation by acknowledging that she must ask the question by saying "I mean, I know you have it written down and you're gonna tell me-" (19–20). "I mean" is a discourse marker with the primary function of forewarning upcoming adjustments (Schiffrin, 1987), and here Trump seems to adjust the face-threat implicit in his counter-accusation by acknowledging that the reporter had to ask the pre-written question. Nonetheless, according to Trump, Alcindor has provided false information and is asking a racist question.

Trump holds the floor and does not allow participation from Alcindor despite her attempts (22, 29). Trump then re-constructs the meaning of nationalist through opposing it to "globalist." When national appears with the category white, as Alcindor used it, it indexes a racist stance. However, when Trump contrasts nationalist with 'globalist, he constructs nationalists as simply people who "love our country" (24). Trump again uses metadiscourse to label Alcindor's question as "insulting" and "terrible" and positions himself as the victim of her racist questioning ("to me," 31). Overall, the meta-discursive label "racist question" is used as a face-attack, a communicative act that is "(seen as) intentionally rude, disrespectful, and insulting" (Tracy, 2008, p. 173). This saves Trump's face through positioning himself as a not-racist victim of Alcindor's racist questioning. In conjunction with Trump's other denials and explanations, "racist question" helps Trump avoid blame for stating something potentially racist and for aligning the Republican party with white nationalists.

The following interaction is between Trump and CBS reporter Weijia Jiang during a press conference on coronavirus testing on May 11, 2020. Analysis of this example illustrates how Trump labels a Chinese-American reporter's question as a "nasty question" in response to her accusation that Trump is being racist toward her. Doing so denies Trump is racist through denying his intent to be racist when telling the reporter to "ask China" her question.

Example 7

1	Jiang	You said many times that the US is doing far better than
2		any other country..when it comes to testing=
3	Trump	=Yes.
4	Jiang	Why does that matter? Why is this a global competition
5		to you if every day Americans are still losing their
6		lives, and we're still seeing more cases every day.
7	Trump	Well they're losing their lives everywhere in the world,
8		and maybe that's a question you should ask
9		China((stylized, stereotypical pronunciation)). Don't ask
10		me, ask China that question. Okay? When you ask them
11		that question, you may get a very unusual answer. Yes
12		behind you please.
13	Jiang	Sir why are you saying that to me , specifically?
14		[That I should ask China?
15	Trump	[I'm telling you I'm not saying it specifically to
16		anybody . I'm saying it to anybody that would ask a nasty
17		[question like that. ((to next journalist)) Please go
18		ahead
19	Jiang	[That's not a nasty question.

Jiang asks Trump to explain why he compares the way the United States is handling COVID-19 to other countries when the US has many cases where people are “losing their lives” (1–6). Trump responds by making comparisons between the US and other countries in the world, particularly China. He directs Jiang to ask China about the pandemic. This is similar to earlier examples (1, 2) where he deflects accusations of racism toward Chinese people by speaking instead about China as a country. The reporter orients to Trump’s directive as a racist comment that assumes the reporter is from China based on her appearance. The reporter uses metadiscourse to bring attention to a problem with Trump’s statement (“why are you saying that to me, specifically,” 13) and then uses indirect reported speech that makes clear the problematic part of Trump’s utterance: “that I should ask China” (14). Trump orients to the reporter’s question as an accusation of racism and responds with metadiscourse that denies her accusation through saying he did not direct the question to anybody, specifically (16) and continues through stating that he would ask this question to *anyone* who asked him a “nasty question” (16–17). Thus, Trump claims that he did not direct this question to the reporter because of her Chinese appearance but rather because she threatened Trump’s face through asking a “nasty question.” The use of “nasty question” also constructs a face-attack against Jiang through evaluating her questions, and by extension her journalistic style, as problematic. Also, unlike the previous example where Trump constructs himself as the victim of Alcindor’s comments, here Trump constructs Jiang as deserving his sarcastic quip about “asking China” because of the “nasty question” she asked.

Trump’s policing of journalist’s questions does not only occur during contentious interactions. In the interaction below, reporter April Ryan accommodates to Trump’s preferred questioning style. Although Ryan has had a contentious relationship with Trump in other contexts (for example asking Trump if he is a racist), in the following interaction Ryan poses a question that both she and Trump evaluate as “professional.” This interaction is from a White House Press Conference on February 16, 2017.

Example 8

1	Trump	Oh this is going to be a bad question , but that's okay.
2	Ryan	No it's not going to be a bad question =
3	Trump	=good. Because I enjoy watching you on television. Go ahead.
4		
5	Ryan	Well thank you so much. Mister President. I need to find out from you. You said something , uh as it relates to inner cities. That was one of your platforms during your campaign, [now your pres-
6		
7		
8		
9	Trump	[Fix the inner cities. Yep. Yep.
10	Ryan	Fixing the inner cities. What will be that fix and your urban agenda as well as your HBCU uh executive order that's coming out this afternoon. Now see it wasn't bad, was it?
11		
12		
13		
14	Trump	No it was very professional, very good.
15	Ryan	[I'm very professional yes.
16	Trump	[Yeah well we'll be announcing the order in a little.

Trump starts with a humorous remark preevaluating Ryan's question as a "bad question" and positioning himself as reasonable and professional for being "okay" with a bad question (1). Ryan denies this accusation directly: it's not going to be a bad question (2). Unlike the previous journalists, Ryan constructs an open question that asks Trump about positively valued things he is doing, such as fixing inner cities and an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) executive order. Ryan also allows Trump to provide his own reported speech about what he said previously about inner cities (9) and then aligns with Trump through repeating this phrasing (10). Immediately upon finishing her question, Ryan adds a metadiscursive question, "Now see it wasn't bad, was it?" (12–13), putting Trump in the position to evaluate Ryan's question before he answers it. Trump proceeds to metadiscursively evaluate the question as "very good" and "very professional" (14). Trump then responds with a lengthy, though not informative, explanation of his policies to "fix inner cities" (not shown). Although analysis of this interaction does not show how Trump responds to accusations of racism, it does illustrate how his metadiscursive strategy of evaluating questions of reporters plays a role in limiting the kinds of questions that fall within the bounds of "professional" questions. Furthermore, accommodating to Trump's preferred ways of communicating allows Trump to control discourse on race and racism – through for example, discussing the broken-ness of inner cities (which in itself is problematic).

Perpetuating racist ideologies through metadiscourse

The above analysis illustrates how Trump's metadiscourse perpetuates racist ideologies. Metadiscourse about whether Trump's speech is racist or not illustrates connections between language ideologies and racism. For example, Trump's metadiscourse about his own language use reproduces the language ideology of referentialism, or the assumption that language is simply a conveyor of information and that words have one, correct meaning (Hodges, 2015). Hodges (2015) illustrates how news media discourses about Trayvon Martin's murder focused on whether Zimmerman (the shooter) used a racial slur or not, orienting to the use of a slur as evidence that the shooting was

racist. In this case, journalists orient to Trump's use of the terms "Chinese virus" or "nationalist" as indicators that he is racist and attempt to hold him accountable for using these terms. Trump's denials, however, label the "Chinese virus" as an "accurate term" and redefines "nationalist" as indicating "love for one's country." Concurrent with these metadiscursive strategies, Trump repeatedly states that he loves his country, thus reproducing language ideologies of personalism – that the meaning of words is based solely on the *intent* of the speaker (Hodges, 2015). People accused of racism often appeal to ideologies of personalism through defending themselves as not *intending* to be racist, and therefore claiming that their utterances are not racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Hill, 2008). Meaning, however, is collaborative and not only defined by the speaker's intent. An orientation to these language ideologies allows Trump to use his authority as president to decide what types of discourse count as racist and subsequently to continue using racist discourse.

When commenting on the language use of others, Trump perpetuates the colorblind ideology of racism: the denial that individuals are racist, that racism is a broader problem, or that race is relevant to society more generally (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Colorblind ideology "begins from a predominantly white experience of the world, where race is perceived as unimportant, thereby negating the life world of people of color, whose experiences are still very much shaped by race" (Whitehead & Lerner, 2009, p. 617). For example, Trump's performed shock and disgust accompanying his naming of a reporter's questions as "racist" or "nasty" positions minorities as overreacting and seeing racism where it does not exist. Another common discursive strategy that perpetuates colorblind ideology is stating that having Black (or minority) friends allows you to say racist things without being considered racist. When Trump jokes about "fake news" during the 2017 Black History Month Listening Session, for example, he is simultaneously denying that he is racist *and*, through using "fake news" in a humorous way, is displaying to the viewing public his amiable relationships with African American people. This allows Trump to maintain a friendly appearance toward African Americans even as he makes policies and encourages violence against African American communities (Sierra & Shrikant, 2020). Trump's repeated use of "fake news" and his demonizing of China more broadly contributes to far-right political projects that instill fear through delegitimizing media, scapegoating minorities and/or other countries, and promoting conspiracy theories (Wodak, 2015).

Last, our analysis points to some ways that Trump's use of metadiscourse reproduces racist ideologies specific to particular racial and ethnic minority groups. For example, Trump's claim that "Chinese virus" is an "accurate term" conflates Chinese Americans and China, which aligns with xenophobic ideologies more generally, and with ideologies of Asian Americans as "forever foreigners" who, despite being American, are still seen as foreign, and at times, dangerous (Ono & Pham, 2009). Trump's treatment of Alcindor's question as a "racist question" reproduces ideologies that position Alcindor as an unreasonably angry Black woman who victimizes Trump through supposedly aggressive behavior (Ashley, 2014).

Overall, each instance of denial does not occur in a vacuum but rather is publicly circulated and becomes a part of broader discourses of racism with which the general public becomes acquainted. Trump's denials contribute to constructing an authoritative (white) consensus on the kinds of words and actions that count as racist (van Dijk,

1992). Perpetuating these racist ideologies has material consequences, as evidenced by the increase in racist violence and white nationalist movements throughout Trump's presidency (Cineas, 2021; Williamson & Gelfand, 2019)

Conclusions

These findings extend theorizing on racism in interaction. First, our analysis highlights the utility of a discourse analytic approach for teasing out ways that everyday interaction upholds racist ideology, which in turn justifies and maintains racism in the United States. Close analysis of the excerpts illustrates that the specifics of interactional and relational contexts matter for understanding how racism works (Shrikant, 2020a; Sierra, 2019; van Dijk, 1992; van den berg et al., 2003). For example, Trump's uses of metadiscourse vary depending on how a reporter frames a question (example 1 vs 2) and whether the interaction is more adversarial (examples 6, 7) or friendly (examples 3–5). Furthermore, others' recognition of Trump's interactional strategies, such as repeatedly using “fake news” or evaluating reporter's questions, can result in accommodation to Trump's preferred styles of interacting (examples 4, 5, 8). Thus, Trump's interaction styles shape the ways that others choose to interact with Trump. In addition, Trump's use of metadiscourse allows him to simultaneously save face for his racist remarks and avoid blame for any consequences of his remarks (Arundale, 2006; Hansson, 2015; Tracy, 2008; van Dijk, 1992; Wodak, 2015). Trump's face-work ranges from attempting to save his own face through reevaluating his own remarks to face-attacks that overtly threaten others' faces. When attacking others' face, Trump uses metadiscourse to defend himself as a victim (example 6) or to position the person (or country) he attacks as deserving the attack because of things they said (example 7). As these interactions occur as part of a political genre of speaking, these denials not only help Trump save face, but also avoid blame (Hansson, 2015) for increasing bias against Asian Americans (example 1) or positioning Republicans as white nationalists (example 6).

Second, this analysis extends discourse analytic theorizing on the forms and functions of metadiscourse. We highlight the polysemous quality of metadiscourse (Gordon & Luke, 2016) through showing how metadiscourse simultaneously serves interactional, indexical, and ideological functions. Interactionally, we show ways that metadiscourse can be used as a strategy to accomplish denials of racism (Billig, 2001; Shrikant, 2020a). Trump uses various forms of metadiscourse – ranging from reported speech to description or labeling of his own or other's words – for purposes of avoiding social accountability for being racist or saying racist things. Indexically, Trump uses metadiscursive language that points to socially shared meanings. The clearest example of this is Trump's use of “fake news,” which has indexical qualities that make it humorous and therefore more “effective” for achieving Trump's interactional aims. Last, denying racism – repeatedly through these metadiscursive strategies – reproduces racist ideologies that uphold status quo inequalities among white and minority groups. Through focusing on the choices Trump makes in specific interactional contexts, we highlight how an individual's agency motivates alignment with broader ideologies of racism, thereby constituting ideologies (Shrikant, 2020a).

We focused on a close analysis of a smaller set of data; thus our findings are unique in that they explicate ways that Trump interacted during these public political interactions in United States socio-political contexts. However, our theoretical contributions about simultaneous interactional, indexical, and ideological functions of discursive strategies used to deny racism can be expanded upon by future research. For example, future research can analyze strategies used to deny racism in different interactional and sociopolitical contexts, thus documenting the variety of contextually-specific ways denials of racism occur. Furthermore, our analysis points to ways that journalists attempt to hold Trump accountable for racist language. Future work can focus on anti-racist discourse strategies, ones that can help question and subvert broadly circulating ideologies of racism, and help us imagine better, more just futures.

Note

1. While Sclafani (2018) finds that metadiscourse about the language of Trump's presidential campaign circulated in news reports, op-eds, commentaries from professional debate coaches, round-table style political talk shows, parodic impersonations on late-night talk shows, and various types of social media quoting in the form of retweets, memes, etc., we additionally find that metadiscourse about Trump once he was in office also appeared in press events such as those we analyze here.

Data availability statement

Data available within the article or its [supplementary materials](#).

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Appendix

Example	Event	Date	Link
Example 1	Whitehouse Briefing from Coronavirus Task force	March 18, 2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=kV58aTQ46Rw
Example 2	Whitehouse Press Briefing	March 18, 2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=8ii04rJxYAg
Examples 3-5	2017 Black History Month Listening Session	February 1, 2017	www.c-span.org/video/?42332-1/president-trumpholdsafrikan-american-history-month-listening-session
Example 6	White House News Conference	November 7, 2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=7bSMiSTdthE
Example 7	Press Conference on Coronavirus Testing	May 11, 2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=t4vKC-hYiqo
Example 8	White House Press Conference	February 16, 2017	https://youtu.be/W5FRUM-AK9k?t=4234