The communicative issues at stake at the YWCA begin and end with attitudes and language about racism. Keri Jones, Chief Program Office at the YWCA, is concerned with the portion of the organization’s mission statement that strives to “eliminate racism”. This literature review will focus on issues of language and racism, specifically injurious language (as defined by Butler [1997]), since the YWCA’s racial justice trainings have focused on dealing with discursive acts of racism. Also, the survey I designed and sent out to YWCA staff members assesses phenomenological attitudes about these trainings, racism at the YWCA in general, and the coding of that data will focus on language usage and how attitudes are reflected in language.

Theories about speech acts and performativity take as a given that, as Austen (1975) claims, language does things and does not just merely say things (p. 7). The performative utterance, as defined by Austen, is “the issuing of the utterance [that] is the performing of an action” (p. 4). Illocutionary and perlocutionary speech are two types of performative utterances Austen defines in his book. In illocutionary speech, the speaker asks a particular question with an implied, intended meaning. For example, when someone calls a house and asks if so-and-so is there, they also don’t feel the need to say, “Well, may I speak with her”? The question of “may I speak with her” is implied in the first question: “is so-and-so there?” The speaker’s
intent, then, seems paramount to understanding the perlocutionary force behind the literal value of the speech act. In fact, Austen notes “Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons: and it may be done with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them” (p. 101). Because Austen focuses on the intent of the speaker and notes how an utterance may act upon any parties involved in the situation, he gives language a minimal amount of agency while simultaneously tying that agency directly (and only) to the speaker. Essentially, the addressee has no agency or control over the effect of the speech.

Austen further reinforces the addressee’s lack of agency when he theorizes how speech acts become either “felicitous” or “infelicitous,” but that what makes them so are either circumstantial conditions or sincerity on the part of the speaker (p. 14).

In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler (1997) takes up Austen’s speech act theory and collapses the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech by removing speaker intent. For Butler, language is an instrument of power that has its own agency separate from the speaker; its affect is in its effect, not in its intent. Injurious speech, then, is utterance that causes the addressee to “suffer a loss of context, that is, not to know where you are”. As Butler claims, the performative effect of the injurious utterance puts the addressee “out of control” and disorients her from time and place (p. 4). Butler’s notion of injurious speech is important to understanding how racism might operate at the YWCA since, at its core, the organization is one that strives to help and empower women, not hurt them with damaging speech. In other words, it is likely that acts of discursive racism are
occurring at the level of unintended injury rather than blatant acts of hate speech. This is an assumption that has yet to be tested, but the literature put out by the YWCA and the experiences I have had at the center lead me to intuit that assumption for now.

Butler (1997) argues that “speaking is itself a bodily act,” and because language is constitutive, it can be harmful psychologically and physically. Furthermore, for Butler, language has agency to harm regardless of a speaker’s intent (p. 10). For my purposes at the YWCA, I am interested in the performative wherein the speaker may say one thing but the addressee may infer a harmful perlocutionary force that the speaker did not say; thus, the question of an addressee’s agency is crucial to both the arguments of Austen and Butler and for my purposes in this research. As explained earlier, Austen’s (1975) speech act theory removes agency from the addressee since she or he is continually acted upon by both the speaker and the speaker’s language. Removing agency from the addressee is problematic in a number of ways, not the least of which is leaving the addressee always vulnerable to the effect of the utterance as an inert subject. The language itself, as well as the speaker, has agency to back away from a harmful utterance: the speaker by saying, “that’s not what I meant,” and the language through any number of conditional exceptions (described by Austen as making a speech act infelicitous).

Critical agency is at stake for the women and children and staff members of color at the center who may be experiencing perlocutionary effects that are harmful when a speech act is perceived to be injurious. Because a speaker can retract the statement or clarify his or her intent at any point during the utterance’s
performance, it becomes difficult to theorize a discursive space of resistance for people who feel harmed by injurious speech. For example, a statement that starts with, “I am not racist, but [...]” and then proceeds to say a racist comment is simultaneously an acknowledgement of the racist nature of the statement as well as an attempt to mitigate the perlocutionary force through recognition of its hurtful potentiality. In this case, a speaker has the agency to act as if the recognition of racism in a statement in any way ameliorates its injurious capacity.

In the case of the YWCA, because staff members have been undergoing monthly racial justice trainings for approximately one year now, and because the efficacy of those trainings is unclear, it can be inferred that acts of racism are perhaps small, covert, or even unintentional, and often qualify as “racial microaggressions” (Sue, et al. 2007). Sue, et al (2007) define racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). The important point to notice here is that microaggressions, like injurious language, can be intentional or unintentional—it is the effect that matters. But since these acts of injurious language have agency without intent, they can be difficult to identify, difficult to measure, and difficult to prove, which is what the YWCA is facing as it attempts to “measure” the efficacy of the racial justice trainings. As Butler writes, “that there appears to be no description that is ‘proper’ to linguistic injury makes it more difficult to identify the specificity of linguistic vulnerability over and against
physical vulnerability” (p. 4). This means that unlike bruises or black eyes, proof of injurious speech is hard to come by.

Kehleher, et. al (2009) argue that transformative action against racial microaggressions can take place at the leadership level if leadership is willing to acknowledge issues of structural racism along with racial microaggressions or injurious speech acts. For example, having a disproportionate percentage of management staff compared to the racial make-up of the staff as a whole (or the clientele, in the case of the YWCA) is an issue of structural racism that needs to be addressed by people in leadership positions. In other words, unless racial equality and multi-raciality is represented in the leadership, work at the discursive level of racism might be meaningless. And because “racialized outcomes do not require racist actors,” it is even more imperative to address and negotiate issues of structural racism at the YWCA’s organizational level (Kehleher 2009 p. 3).

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December 4, 2012

INTRODUCTION

This research project is the result of a collaborative effort between the University of Utah and the YWCA. Specifically, I conducted research with the assistance and full collaboration of Keri Jones, Chief Program Office of the YWCA, over the course of several months in fall 2012. This project is still in progress and will be for several more months to come. I hope this turns into a long-term partnership between Jones and me since I have enjoyed working with this organization and would like to learn more about their communicative processes.

This paper must be read as a work-in-progress. The time limits of the semester, in addition to the conflicting time constraints between the academy (where I am) and the YWCA (where Jones is) limits the discussion and analysis I can perform on this data. This will be an on-going project. (For additional information about the complexities involved in community partnerships in a university setting, see the literature review for Community Engagement, posted as part of this portfolio.)

Therefore, what is presented below is a background description of the YWCA, a discussion of the research question and the issues at stake, a description of the methodology used, and a discussion that points to implications for future research, including where I hope to take this project in the coming months.
BACKGROUND ON THE YWCA

The YWCA of Salt Lake City has been in operation since 1906 and has been providing a voice for women since its inception. The YWCA prides itself on its ability for adaptive change according to the changing needs of women and the city’s demographics. The YWCA serves more than 11,000 people annually and over 1,000 people reside on campus each year. Of those patrons, one-half are White, one-third speaks Spanish; and the remaining are refugees from Bosnia and/or Africa (Jones Interview 2012).

Mission Statement for the YWCA:

*The YWCA is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all. For more than 100 years the YWCA Salt Lake City has been a voice for women, a force for change, and a place for hope in Utah.*

Currently, the YWCA has seven programs at its campus in downtown Salt Lake City. Each of the programs falls into one of the four focuses of the organization: Personal Safety, Childcare, Education, and Racial Justice (www.ywca.org). The campus includes short-term and long-term housing, childcare services for children living on campus and a community childcare center for outside community members (a revenue stream for the center). The campus has police officers on site to protect women, youth, and children from harm, and the Family Justice Center provides counseling, legal, and protective order services all within one building, enabling women and children to stay in a comfortable space while rebuilding their lives. The campus also has a fully stocked clothing and personal items room where
women, teens, and children can pick out their own clothes from the donated selection, enabling patrons with dignity, agency, and the power to choose.

The YWCA has about one hundred staff members, including management personnel and part-time personnel. Staff members work throughout the entire campus, from the Family Justice Center, to the drop-in child care center, to the cleaning and maintenance facility (Jones Interview 2012).

**RESEARCH QUESTION AND ISSUES AT STAKE**

Although the “eliminating racism” portion of the mission statement has been an important part of the mission and credo of the YWCA for a while, the campus is still working on understanding the complexities of that goal. Directors at the YWCA have incorporated the Racial Justice component into one of the four main goals of the organization, and this past year, have implemented monthly Racial Justice trainings for all staff members (Jones Interview 2012).

The Racial Justice trainings have come about with the help of the University of Utah and several scholars on campus who conducted focus groups and helped organize a training that would enable staff members to recognize and name racially insensitive or discriminatory behaviors amongst staff. Keri Jones, the director of the YWCA, and the partner with whom I have most closely worked, strongly recognizes the need for the Racial Justice trainings, but she is unsure of their efficacy (Jones Interview 2012). The center has had two staff members of color leave within the last year, presumably under negative circumstances.

Jones feels the majority of staff members are fairly experienced with the “safety,” “empowerment,” and “feminist” vocabulary used on campus and in the
discourse, but that the same cannot be said for the racial justice vocabulary. In the past, the YWCA has compared racism to sexism and borrowed from that linguistic legacy to help staff members understand racial discrimination (Jones Interview 2012). But discussing and understanding white privilege is a crucial component of eliminating racism, and unpacking white privilege for white people requires delicate maneuvers. Additionally, the discourses surrounding white privilege do not necessarily correspond to the discourses surrounding sexism because it is at the intersection of racism and sexism that oppression often lives and where true transformative change can take place (Collins 1999). This intersection is a crucial place to start the work of eliminating racism, but cannot be accomplished without an understanding of how sexism and racism work together and are complicated by issues of white privilege (Leadership and Race 2010). To explicate that point even more, the majority of the management staff is white even with attempts to diversify staff. Jones’ concerns include the following questions:

1. How to measure the Racial Justice trainings’ success and efficacy;
2. How to measure staff accountability on eliminating racism;
3. How to ensure staff feel successful at eliminating racism every day;
4. How to bridge the gap between the trainings and the implementation and measurement;
5. How to develop language for “what’s next” once racial discrimination has been identified;
6. How to know if staff members feel safe in internally addressing issues of racial justice and/or discrimination, especially considering the management is mostly white;
7. How to train for mission metrics?
METHODOLOGY

Together, Jones and I decided the best course of action would be to design a survey that would address some of the questions she was curious about regarding the racial justice training. I designed the survey with consultation from Maureen Mathison, Associate Professor of Communications and Director of the University Writing Program. I aimed to offer between 10-15 questions in order to tell respondents that the survey should only take about 10 minutes to complete. Although I could have included many more questions, I wanted to improve the likelihood of receiving substantial answers rather than risk losing respondent interest (Groves, et al 2009). I designed a mixture of short answer and Likert scale questions. The short answer questions were written to capture phenomenological experiences. That is, we wanted to know how respondents felt about the racial justice trainings, and not what they could regurgitate from those trainings (Westby, et al 2003; Richards and Morse 2012; www.evaluationtoolsforracialequity.org). We also chose to make the surveys electronic, anonymous, and optional to maximize participation and honesty and to alleviate any concerns about job security within an already tense context.

The survey went through multiple drafts in collaboration with Keri Jones, her managing director, and myself. The final survey is below:

SURVEY

1. How would you identify your position within the organization? (Example: supervisory, part-time, temporary, managerial, etc.)

2. How would you rate your job satisfaction at the YWCA?
3. I feel I have learned new information at the racial justice trainings.

4. Describe something you have learned at the racial justice trainings that has been helpful for you in your daily work at the YWCA.

5. The racial justice trainings have given me confidence and ability to identify racially insensitive behaviors in my colleagues.

6. The racial justice trainings have given me confidence and ability to help our clients.

7. The racial justice trainings have given me confidence and ability to identify racially insensitive behaviors in myself.

8. Describe an experience where you felt uncomfortable or unable to handle a situation that occurred in your work at the YWCA.

9. Reflecting back, how might you have been better prepared to handle the above situation (examples: more training in a certain area, different management techniques, better access to resources, etc.)?

10. Have you ever felt discriminated against at work? If so, describe the experience.

11. How would you describe what “racism” is to someone who had never heard of the term?
12. Describe what you think future trainings should focus on.

13. I feel comfortable discussing my concerns with the management staff at the YWCA.

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<th>1 = strongly disagree</th>
<th>2 = disagree</th>
<th>3 = neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>4 = agree</th>
<th>5 = strongly agree</th>
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14. Are there policies at the YWCA that you feel should be changed or eliminated? If so, why?

15. I feel the management staff at the YWCA is aware of racial justice and racial sensitivity issues.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 = strongly disagree</th>
<th>2 = disagree</th>
<th>3 = neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>4 = agree</th>
<th>5 = strongly agree</th>
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Respondents were also given the option to write additional unsolicited comments and to divulge their name and contact information if they were willing to meet with me separately. Because I have been unable to get the survey back in time to analyze the data for this portion of the project, I have also not been able to meet with any staff members individually to conduct interviews, although I plan to in the coming months.

Once the survey is returned, I will code the data using a combination of Thematic Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis. Thematic Analysis is a method of qualitative analysis based on participants’ conceptions of actual communication episodes; a theme is identified based on recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Data analysis is then organized around centrally emerging themes (Cresswell 2008; Richards and Morse 2012). Critical Discourse Analysis as described by Fairclough and Wodak (1997) is reading discourse—“the language use in speech and writing—
as a form of ‘social practice’ to interpret and analyze how power, culture, and ideology, is being performed through that discourse (p. 258). Jones and I both agreed that the survey data would be more useful to the YWCA using a phenomenological, qualitative approach, looking at issues of language usage that reflect attitudes rather than a quantitative approach that limited our interpretations to statistics, although at some point, this data may take both forms.

Additionally, as a researcher doing community-based, semi-ethnographic work, I adhere to theorists such as McCorkel and Meyer (2003) and Conquergood (1985, 1991, 2002), among many, and will attempt to reflect on my positionality within this paper, recognizing and referencing my power, privilege, and identity within the research context and in regards to interpreting the responses from the survey in the future.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Based on the preliminary research I have conducted with the YWCA, and based on my review of the literature, I feel I am able to make a few assumptions regarding implications for future research, although I am limited in this area because of the lack of data.

My instinct is that the YWCA’s mission statement of “eliminating racism” is a misguided goal that cannot be accomplished in actuality, which is part of what is making it difficult to train and assign metrics for. That is, the goal of eliminating racism is situated within liberal discourses that promote notions of “colorblindness” in favor of recognition of white power, privilege, and supremacy. Problematically, as I mentioned earlier, the language used to define and explain white privilege is
specific and most meaningful within the larger discourse of critical race studies. This because problematic when people who are familiar with the discourse within critical race studies or critical whiteness studies attempt to explain white privilege to those unfamiliar with the language. I know this from firsthand experience when confronting my own white privilege in multiple classes on critical race studies. The process is often painful and feels like a reckoning. Furthermore, studying critical whiteness often feels very personal and implicating, but that is part of the process. Unfortunately, for scholars of critical race and/or whiteness studies, the audience must be somewhat receptive to acknowledge the possibility that their privilege is unearned and may have come as a result of their white skin. And, of course, tied up with issues of race are gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality that intertwine together to oppress in multiple ways and also work to obfuscate oppressive discourses in other ways.

Ultimately, the goal of “eliminating racism” is a misguided one—not because it is not a noble endeavor, but because it ignores the larger issues of difference, privilege, and power. My sense is that the survey data will reflect the confusion associated with attempts to eliminate racism as staff members explain their feelings about the racial justice trainings and the YWCA mission. Perhaps a reframing of the mission statement is one way to think differently about racism within the organization. Maybe a more effective way to phrase the goal is to “recognize racism” or to “acknowledge issues of race and privilege”. While neither of these sounds as noble or empowering as “eliminating racism,” they more accurately represent the real issues at hand. As a scholar of language and power, I argue that
language/discourse both creates and reflects reality; therefore, empowering staff members with a way to talk about issues of race and privilege might be a helpful starting point in changing attitudes.

RESOURCES


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