



# Missing the target: group practices that launch and deflect slurs



Jacquelyn Rahman\*

Miami University, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 18 May 2015

### Keywords:

Ideology  
Stereotype  
Nigger  
Nigga  
Indexing  
Counterlanguage

## ABSTRACT

Slurring by a group is generally an outcome of a group ideology that casts the targeted group in a negative light, attributing undesirable traits to every member of the group. The slur stands in as representative of those traits. A group levying a slur hopes to inflict psychological damage on the targeted group, minimizing or eradicating competition and potentially boosting the self-image of the group inflicting the slur. African Americans, the group that has been most heavily targeted by slurs, have developed strategies to lessen or eliminate the negative effects of slurring. Examining the African American response to slurring can shed light on how other targeted groups might respond.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Croom describes slurs as “derogatory expressions that target certain group members on the basis of descriptive features such as their racial or sexual identity” (Croom, 2014:4; also 2010:139). Over time, groups characterized by traits as varied as race, economic status, gender, religion and sexual orientation have been targets of slurs in the United States. Slurs have been short-lived, such as *tippybobs* for a member of the upper social classes (Allen, 1983: 112) or enduring, such as *nigger*. Over time social, political and economic circumstances have changed, but through varying mechanisms the general population has often been aware of the existence of specific slurs and of the referential and connotative meanings that they have conveyed. This paper addresses issues related to why and how slurs emerge, as well as how groups and individual members of groups may respond to being slurred.

Scholars have repeatedly commented on the offensiveness of slurs (Kennedy, 2002; Asim, 2007; Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2014; Hedger, 2012; Hill, 2008; Butler, 1997). As well, scholars have pointed to the harm caused by slurs (Hoover, 2007; Butler, 1997; Croom, 2014; Jeshion, 2013). Croom notes that slurs “have been considered to pack some of the nastiest punches natural language affords” (2014: 147). This statement suggests an idea inherent in speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), where words can perform actions. Calling on speech act theory, legal scholars working in critical race theory create a metaphor in which slurs are weapons, with effects on targets that are akin to the effects of a physical assault (Kennedy, 2002; Hill, 2008). The view of critical race theorists is that since slurring is similar to physical assault and often accompanied by it, use of slurs should be forbidden.

Considering their apparent ability to cause harm raises a question of how slurs arise in the first place and what causes groups to create and use them. Putting aside issues related to word-selection and word formation processes, a question

\* Tel.: +1 513 874 3393.

E-mail address: [rahmanj@miamioh.edu](mailto:rahmanj@miamioh.edu).

becomes how a simple word, sometimes used innocuously in the past, acquires a social meaning that grants it perlocutionary power to do harm. An issue in this paper is whether there is a generally similar motivating theme that underlies the creation and proliferation of slurs against various groups, perhaps related to social, political and economic factors. What are groups creating and employing slurs trying to accomplish?

Research shows that slurs levied against members of groups perceived as having relatively low societal status, such as women, African Americans, and small groups of foreigners, are seen as being particularly offensive (Haslam et al., 2011; Mullen et al., 2000, 2001; Henry et al., 2014). These groups may be in a constant state of hypervigilance due to ongoing experiences with discrimination (Allport, 1954; Henry, 2009, 2011; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Kraus et al., 2011; Henry et al., 2014) and there is an expectation that members of such groups will have an emotional reaction to being slurred (Henry et al., 2014; Henry, 2009, 2011). There is also a belief that members of these groups may suffer serious psychological damage as a result of being subjected to slurs (Hoover, 2007; Butler, 1997; Croom, 2014; Jeshion, 2013).

Regarding slurs, Allen states that a primitive belief exists that if one can name or attach a label to a group, then one can wield power over it simply by calling its name. “If the name is abusive, denigrating, scolding, or ridiculing, it is expected that this definition will elicit an appropriate response, such as causing the victim to cower, to be denigrated, to be scolded and thus to feel guilty, or to act out, the prophecy of the ridiculousness” (Allen, 1983: 16).

So, is this prophecy fulfilled? How do the actions and behavior of targeted groups connect with findings, expectations and beliefs that exist concerning targets of slurs? It is established that group members may suffer psychological damage from slurring. But beyond that and beyond immediate emotional reactions to name-calling, are responses of groups over time consistent with expectations cited by Allen? It is possible that targeted groups have no obvious reaction at all and remain stoic and impervious to slurring. Another possibility is that targets respond to slurring with a sense of powerlessness and total lack of agency, so that they are left vulnerable and susceptible to all of the damaging effects of slurs. But considering the natural drive that humans have for survival, another possibility is that targeted groups find ways to attempt to counter the negative psychological effects of slurring.

## 2. Contexts of slurs

The paper will show that the development and proliferation of slurs of all types quite often follows a pattern. Slurs generally emerge in environments where there are perceptions of conflict, competition, or extreme anxiety caused by the presence of an outside group, usually in physical, political, social or economic space. On a deep and perhaps unconscious level, as Allen points out, the motivation of a group that levies a slur against another group is to actually inflict psychological damage (Allen, 1983, 1990). The hope is that in this way, the inflictor of a slur may gain an advantage over the target of a slur. Allen states the following: “Name calling is a technique by which outgroups are defined as legitimate targets of aggression and is an effort to control outgroups by neutralizing their efforts to gain resources and influence values” (Allen, 1983: 15). Denigrating an outside group may also serve to bolster a group’s sense of mastery and self-worth. Fein and Spencer find that negative evaluation of another group can serve a self-affirming function, allowing group members to “feel better about themselves” ... and “often saving themselves from having to confront the real sources of self-image threat” (Fein and Spencer, 1997: 31).

Ideologies grow out of the struggle that takes place among social groups, with groups developing strategies to bolster their status or position, while minimizing or eliminating the status of another group (Woolard, 1998; Eagleton, 1991; Lippi-Green, 2012). A group creating a slur sees an outside group as posing a threat. Through intergroup dialog, the group creating the slur develops an ideology that casts the group creating the slur in a privileged, normative light. At the same time, the ideology portrays the outside group as inferior, ascribing to the outside group a set of negative attributes (Rahman, 2014). The ideology promotes a perception that all members of the outside group are alike in sharing a non-normative characteristic or set of characteristics that sets them apart as different and inferior to the group making the assessment. The negative portrayal of a targeted group serves as justification for mistreatment and discrimination against the group (Allen, 1983; Hom, 2008).

On the other side, social psychologists (Crocker et al., 1991; Steele et al., 1993) observe that where groups feel that they are experiencing denigration, marginalization and discrimination, they may create strategies to protect their group self-image. As a strategy against slurring, groups may employ *saturation*, described by psychologists as a process whereby there is an attempt to cause a group to become desensitized to a stimulus through repetition (Lewis and Ellis, 2000; Rahman, 2012). Because of the conflicted messages associated with *nigga* African Americans, especially comedians, have employed *saturation* in efforts to inure community members to perceptions of harshness of the term. (Rahman, 2012). They may also employ appropriation where, according to Hom, “the targeted group takes control of the epithet, and alters its meaning for use within the group” (Hom, 2008: 428).

Slurring does not occur in a social, political and economic vacuum. Rather, it is a salient aspect of a broader pattern of discrimination, marginalization, and mistreatment, so that where a group resists oppression, it is also resisting slurring. In some instances, groups have developed a set of beliefs about a group discriminating and levying a slur against them that serves to buffer the psychological effects of discrimination and in so doing, lessen the effects of slurring. This may involve creating a narrative about the aggressing group that turns the tables and shines a spotlight on perceived deficiencies in the group levying the slur, while simultaneously highlighting perceived strengths in the group that was previously targeted.

This article discusses a range of social groups as targets of slurs. But because African Americans, who have been the most heavily targeted social group, in many ways exemplify the relationship between contexts and the production and response to

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1103014>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1103014>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)