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Slurs against masculinity: masculine honor beliefs and men's reactions to slurs

Donald A. Saucier*, Derrick F. Till, Stuart S. Miller, Conor J. O'Dea, Emma Andres

Kansas State University, USA

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ABSTRACT

We examined the manifestation and effects of slurs against men and masculinity. In Study 1, we created a taxonomy of slurs against men and masculinity. In Study 2, we established that men may respond with physical aggression when targeted by these slurs. In Study 3, we demonstrated that slurs in different categories of our taxonomy produce varying levels of perceived offensiveness and likelihoods of aggressive responses. Finally, in Study 4, we showed that men's masculine honor beliefs are associated with their perceptions of slurs as offensive and the ratings of their likelihood of responding physically, especially for slurs that directly challenge their masculinity. These findings extend the extant literature that has examined the content of and reactions to slurs and physically aggressive responses to provocation, as well as that which has examined conceptualizations of masculine honor from both cultural and individual difference perspectives.

"Them's fighting words." This colloquialism indicates that the speaker has reached his (or her, but usually his) tolerance of verbal abuse from an instigator, and will now respond aggressively. This reactive aggression serves to both punish the instigator for the offense and deter future abuse. The purpose of this program of research was to examine men's perceptions of the offensiveness of slurs. We were particularly interested in slurs that target a man's masculinity, and may provoke physically aggressive responses. It was our objective first to develop a taxonomy of slurs against men and masculinity, and then to test our predictions that more extreme reactions to slurs, particularly to those that target men's masculinity, would be associated with men's greater levels of adherence to masculine honor beliefs. Our overarching research question is: does masculine honor predict aggressive responses in men who have been targeted by slurs against masculinity?

Slurs are terms used, at least initially, to disparage individuals, often on the basis of their membership in some social group (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Camp, 2013; Croom, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). Slurs may convey stereotypes about groups and perpetuate a perspective, often negative, about the groups (Camp, 2013; Jeshion, 2013; Mullen, 2001; Vallée, 2014). This may result in the devaluation of targets of the slurs (Greenberg and Pyszczynski, 1985; Merskin, 2010) and may produce negative psychological consequences in the targets, such as feelings of exclusion (Schneider et al., 2000). Interestingly, these effects may vary as a function of the groups targeted by the slurs (Croom, 2014a; Galinsky et al., 2013; Henry et al., 2014).

Historically slur usage has been largely derogatory. However, it is also possible for slurs to be used for non-derogatory purposes (Croom, 2013a). Research on slur appropriation has shown that minority groups often "take back" slurs that

* Corresponding author. Kansas State University, Department of Psychological Sciences, 468 Bluemont Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506, USA. Tel.: +1 785 532 6881; fax: +1 785 532 5401.
E-mail address: saucier@ksu.edu (D.A. Saucier).

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have been historically used to degrade their social group. This slur usage may then allow group members to affiliate with each other (Rahman, 2012), and may function to dissociate the slur from its potential to offend (Bianchi, 2014).

When targeted by slurs, the perceptions and reactions to the slurs may vary (Leets, 2003). Slurs are terms that may be simultaneously descriptive and expressive in nature; that is, slurs function to not only describe the individuals against whom the slurs are targeted, but also to express a heightened emotional reaction toward the individuals (Croom, 2011, 2014b). Slurs may serve multiple social and linguistic functions for the individuals who use slurs, but given that slurs are used in social domains, the social reception of slurs may also vary. The perceived intention of the slur and the disposition of the target may moderate the reaction by the target (Garcia et al., 2006). Further, there may be consequences for individuals who use slurs in terms of how they are perceived (Uhlmann et al., 2014).

Much research has examined the linguistic uses and purposes of slurs (e.g., Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2013a; Galinsky et al., 2013; Henry et al., 2014; Rahman, 2012; also see Hedger, 2013, for a philosophical analysis of derogatory slurs), and much of that work has focused on racial slurs (e.g., Hom, 2008; Vallée, 2014). This is not unwarranted given the history and power that racial slurs have had in the manifestation of oppression in societies across the world. Racial slurs have been categorized as "hate speech" (Hornsby, 2001, 2003) in which threats are inherent (Hom, 2008). Further, the use of racial slurs by perpetrators has been a defining feature in the identification of crimes as hate crimes (Czajkowski, 1992; Herek et al., 2002; Saucier et al., 2006; Saucier et al., 2008). While racial slurs are undeniably interesting and powerful, we sought to focus our research on slurs that focus on aspects of the targets other than their race.

In this current research we intend to extend the extant literature by focusing on the perceptions of and reactions to slurs against men in general, and against masculinity (i.e., disparaging terms that target the masculinity of men) in particular. Little research has examined the power of slurs, particularly those not related to race or ethnicity, to instigate an aggressive reaction in targets. Insults in general may be used to establish social patterns of domination and subordination (Gabriel, 1998), and we propose that slurs against men's masculinity in particular may serve as methods by which men's established social positions, social capital, self-concepts, and manhood may be threatened (Anderson, 1999; Croom, 2013a). It should be noted that there is more than one conception of masculinity (e.g., Plummer, 2001). What is most relevant to our purposes in this research is the heterosexual traditional conception of masculinity, and it is this conception of masculinity we reference when we make mention of "slurs against masculinity". Consequently, we investigated how slurs against masculinity are perceived by men and whether slurs against heterosexist masculinity are provocative of aggressive responses. Further, we investigated how perceptions of and reactions to slurs against masculinity are related to men's levels of masculine honor beliefs.

Theories of masculine honor, originating from research on male behavior in the American South, assert that cultures develop and socialize standards for appropriate male behavior. Among these standards is the belief that insults and threats against a man must not go unpunished, or the man will be at increased risk for future insult and threat (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Cohen and Nisbett, 1994, 1997; Cohen et al., 1998; Cohen et al., 1999; Nisbett, 1993). In the American South, men must create and maintain reputations that they are not easy targets for threats to minimize their risk for victimization (Nisbett, 1993). Accordingly, men are socialized, even as children, to adhere to the standards set forth for honorable men in a culture of honor, and to hold other men to those same standards (Cohen and Nisbett, 1994; Cohen et al., 1999). This includes aggressive defense in response to any insult or threat to the man's reputation, manhood, family, or property. Allowing these insults or threats to go unpunished would be in violation of what it means to be man in the culture of honor (Cohen et al., 1998). Simply put, men in cultures of honor learn to adhere to the beliefs that even extreme forms of physical aggression are not only tolerated, but expected when they are threatened, and that slights to their masculinity are to be considered threatening (Anderson, 1999; Cohen and Nisbett, 1994, 1997).

Research has indeed shown that regional differences exist such that Southern men, who are socialized in a culture of honor, respond to insults more aggressively than do Northern men at cognitive, affective, behavioral, and physiological levels (e.g., Cohen et al., 1996). These regional differences had also been demonstrated with Southern boys and men exhibiting increased levels of school violence in response to perceived identity threats (Brown et al., 2009), and even increased rates of suicide when confronting the stigma of being dishonored (Osterman and Brown, 2011). Evidence also exists cross-culturally that being tough and standing up for themselves, and their families, are important aspects of honorable masculinity (e.g., Bandyopadhyay, 2006; Figueredo et al., 2004; IJzerman et al., 2007; Luyt, 2005; van Osch et al., 2013; Rodriquez Mosquera et al., 2002a, 2002b).

More recently, researchers have begun to examine masculine honor beliefs as more than a regional difference, and to treat masculine honor beliefs as an individual difference that accounts for meaningful variance in how men perceive and respond to threats (Barnes et al., 2012; Rodriquez Mosquera et al., 2002b; Saucier and McManus, 2014; Vandello et al., 2009). The attempts to measure individuals' adherence to masculine honor beliefs vary in terms of their focus. Rodriquez Mosquera et al. (2002b) assessed elements of masculine honor, feminine honor, family honor, and integrity, while Vandello et al. (2009) measured combined aspects of masculine and feminine honor. Barnes et al. (2012) focused on masculine honor particularly as it manifests in the American South, but in doing so assessed only the components of masculine honor that directly pertain to the justifiability for male defensive aggression and the qualities of masculinity related to self-sufficiency, pugnacity, and toughness.

Saucier and McManus (2014) also offered an assessment method that focused on masculine honor as it exists in the American South. By not conflating their measurement with other types of honor not related to masculinity, their measure (i.e., the Masculine Honor Beliefs Scale; Saucier and McManus, 2014) is better suited than those offered by Rodriquez Mosquera et al. (2002b) and Vandello et al. (2009) to our purposes of examining how masculine honor in particular is associated with perceptions of and reactions to slurs against men and masculinity. Further, Saucier and McManus (2014) assessed seven