



# Slurs, stereotypes, and in-equality: a critical review of “How Epithets and Stereotypes are Racially Unequal”



Adam M. Croom\*

Department of Linguistics, University of Pennsylvania, 619 Williams Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19104, United States  
 Department of Philosophy, University of Pennsylvania, 433 Cohen Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19104, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Are racial slurs always offensive and are racial stereotypes always negative? How, if at all, are racial slurs and stereotypes different and unequal for members of different races? Questions like these and others about slurs and stereotypes have been the focus of much research and hot debate lately, and in a recent article Embrick and Henricks (2013) aimed to address some of the aforementioned questions by investigating the use of racial slurs and stereotypes in the workplace. Embrick and Henricks (2013) drew upon the empirical data they collected at a baked goods company in the southwestern United States to argue that racial slurs and stereotypes function as symbolic resources that *exclude minorities but not whites* from opportunities or resources and that racial slurs and stereotypes are *necessarily considered as negative or derogatory irrespective of their particular context of use* (pp. 197–202). They thus proposed an account of slurs and stereotypes that supports the *context-insensitive* position of Fitten (1993) and Hedger (2013) yet challenges the *context-sensitive* position of Kennedy (2002) and Croom (2011). In this article I explicate the account of racial slurs and stereotypes provided by Embrick and Henricks (2013), outline 8 of their main claims, and then critically evaluate these claims by drawing upon recent empirical evidence on racial slurs (both in-group and out-group uses) and stereotypes (for both whites and blacks) to point out both strengths and weaknesses of their analysis. Implications of the present analysis for future work on slurs and stereotypes will also be discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Are racial slurs always offensive and are racial stereotypes always negative? How, if at all, are racial slurs and stereotypes different and unequal for members of different races? Questions like these and others about slurs and stereotypes have been the focus of much research and hot debate lately (e.g., [Walton and Cohen, 2003](#); [Croom, 2011, 2013a,b](#); [Camp, 2013](#); [Jeshion, 2013](#)), and in their recent article “Discursive Colorlines at Work: How Epithets and Stereotypes are Racially Unequal,” sociologists [David Embrick and Kasey Henricks \(2013\)](#) aimed to address some of the aforementioned questions by investigating the use of racial slurs and stereotypes in the workplace. [Embrick and Henricks \(2013\)](#) drew upon the empirical data they collected at a baked goods company in the southwestern United States to argue that racial

\* Tel.: +1 2158988563.  
 E-mail address: [adam.m.croom@gmail.com](mailto:adam.m.croom@gmail.com).

slurs and stereotypes generally function to perpetuate white supremacy, racial antagonism, and racial inequality, i.e., that racial slurs and stereotypes function as symbolic resources that *exclude minorities but not whites* from opportunities or resources and that racial slurs and stereotypes are *necessarily considered as negative or derogatory irrespective of their particular context of use* (pp. 197–202). They thus proposed an account of slurs and stereotypes that supports the *context-insensitive* position of Fitten (1993) and Hedger (2013) yet challenges the *context-sensitive* position of Kennedy (2002) and Croom (2011). For example, although they briefly consider the point made by legal scholar Randall Kennedy (2002) that racial slurs like *nigger* are not necessarily considered as negative or derogatory racial insults, particularly when they are used within certain *in-group contexts* (e.g., when a racial slur towards blacks is used among fellow blacks, or when a racial slur towards whites is used among fellow whites), Embrick and Henricks (2013) are clear that they explicitly reject this point:

Kennedy (2002) argues that the term [*nigger*] has been the most socially consequential racial insult, but adds that *it need not be*. The word carries little meaning without context and to say otherwise is to transform it into a fetish (Kennedy 2002). *We disagree*. The term cannot be abstracted from the context it is derived. It is inseparable from a history of white-on-black oppression in which whites enslaved, lynched, and murdered millions of blacks, and often did so as while using this particular slur. (p. 201, my emphasis)

Embrick and Henricks (2013) thus propose an account of slurs and stereotypes that is consonant with that suggested by other scholars like Ronald Fitten (1993) and Joseph Hedger (2013). For instance, in his article for *The Seattle Times* entitled “Fighting Words: No Matter Who Uses Them, Racial Slurs Ultimately Serve To Denigrate and Divide,” Fitten (1993) writes that:

attempts to “demystify” or “redefine” racial slurs are psychologically impossible [...] the use of racial slurs intra-racially perpetuates within the group all of its negative history and, on some levels, is a form of self-hatred [...] intra-racial references to racial slurs [also] have another effect: They make the group or groups originally responsible for creating stigmatizing language feel that the demeaning historical aspects of the words were, and still are, valid.

More recently, the philosopher Joseph Hedger (2013) has argued in his article “Meaning and Racial Slurs: Derogatory Epithets and the Semantics/Pragmatics Interface” that:

No matter the context of conversation, the use of a slur is offensive and expresses contempt. Although Christopher Hom (2008) purports to give some examples of non-derogatory uses of slurs, I follow Anderson and Lepore (2013) in urging that these examples are clearly offensive. Furthermore, I have yet to find a single informant who sides with Hom (2008) on this issue. Hence, since a slur word is offensive in any context, the offensiveness is part of the semantic meaning of slur words, and is not a result of any peculiar use of slurs. (p. 209)

So in contrast with the *context-sensitive* position of scholars like Kennedy (2002) and Croom (2011) which argues that the use of racial slurs *are not* necessarily negative or derogatory and that whether the use of a racial slur is considered negative or derogatory is *dependent* on its particular context of use, Embrick and Henricks (2013) support the *context-insensitive* position of scholars like Fitten (1993) and Hedger (2013) which argues that the use of racial slurs *are* necessarily negative or derogatory and that whether the use of a racial slur is considered negative or derogatory is *independent* of its particular context of use (pp. 197–202). This is why Embrick and Henricks (2013) argue for the *general* or *unqualified* claim about racial slurs and stereotypes, that their use:

represent how white supremacy is preserved [...] to reinforce material inequities. Because acted-upon epithets and stereotypes are racially unequal, their consequences further crystallize each group’s location within the racial order. They serve as resources that impose, confer, deny, and approve other capital rewards in everyday interactions. That is, they further exclude racial minorities, blacks and Latinas/os in particular, from opportunities and resources, all the while preserving the superior status of whites. (p. 211)

In the next section I more fully outline the account of slurs and stereotypes proposed by Embrick and Henricks (2013) and explicate 8 of their main claims, before then turning to critically evaluate these claims by drawing upon recent empirical evidence on racial slurs (both in-group and out-group uses) and stereotypes (for both whites and blacks) to point out both strengths and weaknesses of their analysis. Finally, in the last section I conclude by reviewing our overall discussion of racial slurs and stereotypes and discussing implications for future work.

## 2. “How Epithets and Stereotypes are Racially Unequal”

In their study Embrick and Henricks (2013) investigated the use of slurs and stereotypes in the workplace by conducting a 6-month case study with the staff of a baked-goods company in the southwestern United States

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