



Out of bounds: factors affecting the perceived offensiveness of racial slurs



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 18 October 2014

Keywords:

Racial slurs
Insults
Prejudice
Offensiveness
Pragmatics
Semantics

ABSTRACT

Racial slurs are terms used primarily to disparage individuals belonging to the targeted social group. In two studies, we manipulated racial slurs (“nigger”, “nigga”) used by White individuals toward Black individuals in different situations (between friends versus between strangers) to assess different levels of perceived offensiveness in White third party observers. Consistent with our hypotheses, in Study 1 we found that the use of racial slurs between friends was perceived to be less offensive than between strangers, and “nigga” was perceived to be less offensive than “nigger”. In Study 2 we replicated these results, and extended them by finding that ratings of offensiveness, consistent with hypotheses, were correlated with individual differences relating to the justification and suppression of prejudice. Our findings suggest that observers’ reactions to racial slurs depend on the context in which the slur is used and perceivers’ beliefs about the social appropriateness of expressing prejudice.

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Slurs are terms that have primarily been used with the intention of disparaging individuals of a certain social group (e.g., sex, race, nationality). By using a slur to target a member of an outgroup, individuals are often asserting an overall negative attitude toward the entire target group (Camp, 2013). Slurs are not always used in a derogatory manner, however. Additional research on slurs has found support for the positive use of derogatory slurs among members of the group targeted by the slur. Members of stigmatized groups use appropriated slurs to enhance bonding and express affiliation amongst ingroup members (Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2011; Rahman, 2012; Galinsky et al., 2013). Research thus indicates that, in some situations, slurs are perceived to be less offensive and more socially acceptable.

In the current studies, we examined how the use of various racial slurs in different situations (between friends versus between strangers) affects perceptions of the offensiveness of the racial slur usage by third party observers of the slur, and whether beliefs about the appropriateness of expressions of prejudice are related to how offensive individuals view racial slur usage. Previous research has shown that the presence of a racial slur affects third party witnesses’ judgments of the wrongness of racial crimes such that individuals will recommend a higher prison sentence to the perpetrator of a violent crime and judge the crime to be more severe (i.e., a hate crime) when the perpetrator uses a racial slur (Saucier et al., 2008, 2010).

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In the current studies, we extend previous research by examining the perceived offensiveness of various racial slurs between friends versus strangers and how this perceived offensiveness may be correlated with individual differences related to expressions of prejudice. Previous research has not fully examined how third party observers' perceptions of racial slurs may depend on the context in which the slur was used. Furthermore, there is little existing empirical evidence that examines if variability in perceptions of racial slurs can be explained by individual differences related to prejudice. Extending contemporary theories of prejudice, including the justification-suppression model of prejudice (Crandall and Eshleman, 2003), our overarching research question is: does the extent to which racial slurs are perceived as offensive vary as a function of perceivers' beliefs about the social appropriateness of expressing prejudice?

1. Racial slurs

1.1. What is a slur?

Slurs are terms used primarily to disparage individuals of a targeted racial, gender, or other social group (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Camp, 2013; Croom, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). Slurs often imply negative stereotypes or beliefs about the target group or individual beyond simply identifying group membership. Calling an individual a "nigger" implies more than simply calling that person "Black" (Camp, 2013; Jeshion, 2013; Vallée, 2014). At the semantic level, "nigger" and "Black" appear to function as descriptors, both referring to a person's skin color. However, the term "nigger" implies more than a general description of the target. Use of the term "nigger", as a slur, often or in paradigmatic cases implies that the person targeted by the slur is despicable simply as a result of being part of that social group (Jeshion, 2013; Vallée, 2014) and, thus, may result in negative reactions (e.g., confrontation, social sanctions) by the target or third party observers.

Much research has been done on the semantics and pragmatics of slurs (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Camp, 2013; Croom, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014), examining what is presented and implied by slur usage. There is much debate in current literature over whether slurs are purely descriptive or purely expressive in nature, with descriptivist arguments trending toward semantic properties (i.e., the true meaning of the words being used), and expressivist arguments focusing on the pragmatics (i.e., the implied meaning of the words being used; Hedger, 2012, 2013). Arguing for a compromise between the two extremes, Croom (2011, 2014) asserts that most slurs carry severe negative connotations, thus preventing them from acting as socially appropriate descriptors, although he acknowledges that slurs do not seem to function as pure expressives either, concluding that racial slurs may function as both expressives and descriptors. For the purposes of the current studies, we proceed with Croom's (2011, 2014) compromise acknowledging that slurs may be used to describe an individual, but may also carry negative connotations beyond simple description, thus functioning as both a combination or mixture of expressives and descriptors.

1.2. Effects of slurs

Despite decreases in expressions of overt prejudice in contemporary society, racism (McConahay et al., 1981; Sydel and Nelson, 2000) and the use of racial slurs (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Merskin, 2010) continues to affect individuals of various social groups. Slurs can have negative effects on individuals (Mullen, 2001), which may include lowering their sense of belonging or self-worth (Schneider et al., 2000). While racial slurs can have direct negative effects on the target, research has shown that racial slurs may also have indirect effects on individuals belonging to different social groups. Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985) found that when racial slurs are used between individuals in professional settings and are overheard by third party observers, and that when these third party observers witness the target of the racial slur exhibit poor performance, observers tend to have significantly lower opinions of the individual targeted by the racial slur. They attribute the failure of the individual more to the outgroup member's disposition rather than to the situation. Stated differently, they tend to believe that the target of the racial slur possesses lower abilities rather than attributing the lower performance to stress that result from being disparaged by the racial slur (i.e., stereotype threat). Thus, the effects of racial slurs are not always obvious and explicit. These effects may have negative consequences (e.g., lower chance of career advancement) in the workplace if an outgroup member is viewed more negatively for doing poorly on a task than an ingroup member who has not been targeted by a racial slur. Although the majority of slur usage implies negativity, not all slurs have the same effect. Levels of reported offensiveness by the target of the racial slur vary depending on the racial slur being used (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Schneider et al., 2000).

Slurs are not equal in offensive intensity (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Henry et al., 2014; Jeshion, 2013). Anderson and Lepore (2013) discuss differing perceptions of offensiveness between racial slurs (e.g., "nigger" versus "cracker"), suggesting that the negative connotations surrounding the use of various racial slurs largely changes depending on the word being used. For example, "nigger" is thought by many to be the worst racial slur (Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2011; Jeshion, 2013) and has even been referred to as the "filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 23). The term "nigger" results in extremely negative reactions such that many would feel ashamed for even hearing it (Croom, 2011). Other slurs are obviously derogatory, although they do not carry the same extreme negative reactions by targets or third party perceivers of the slur. Thus, consistent with Croom (2013a; 2014), we hypothesize that the perceived offensiveness of a racial slur by a third party observer will vary as a function of the racial slur that is used, such that the term "nigger" will be perceived as more offensive than the term "nigga", or other, non-racial insults.

Slurs may be used in many different social settings (e.g., between friends versus between strangers). Because of the abundance of situations in which slurs may occur, there is difficulty in accounting for situational factors that directly affect

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