



Broken bridges: an exchange of slurs between African Americans and second generation Nigerians and the impact on identity formation among the second generation



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of slurs between members of different ethnic groups within the black racial category in the United States—specifically, the second generation of Nigerian ancestry and African Americans, as reported by the second generation of Nigerian ancestry. Studies on inter-group usage of slurs have mostly focused on the use of racial slurs targeting African Americans, the use of racial and ethnic slurs targeting non-black racial/ethnic groups, and the use of sexist slurs targeting people of different gender and sexual orientation. There has been limited analysis of use of slurs between ethnic groups within the black racial category in the United States. My investigation shows that slurs are part of the process of identity formation for the second generation. Also, the use of slurs between these two ethnic groups within the black category provides more evidence for Croom's (2010, 2011, and 2013) point that slurs do not always have to be used in a derogatory manner. It adds to what we know about the nonderogatory use of slurs by showing that a slur can be used as a socialization tool for young in-group members. I show that slurs can be appropriated by the group using the slur to target out-group members and that slurs can also be used within their own group to send a cautionary message to group members based on the derogatory meanings that are infused into the slur.

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1. Introduction

Slurs are derogatory words used to ridicule or demean members of certain groups (Croom, 2011; Hedger, 2013). Over the course of U.S. history, various ethnic and ethnoreligious groups have been the target of *ethnic slurs*, defined as any unfavorable, derisive, or disparaging jokes, name callings, anecdotes, sayings, rhymes, or riddles directed against an ethnic group (Garcia, 1976). Slurs directed at black people in the United States receive a lot of attention in scholarly and public debate largely because such slurs are viewed as more racially unequal in their impact due to the lingering influence of slavery and legal segregation, and the ongoing racial prejudice and discrimination against black people (Embrick and Henricks, 2013; Hedger, 2013; Croom, 2014).

However, there has been limited analysis of the use of slurs between ethnic groups within the black racial category in the United States. Reasons for this lie in the history of black people in the United States. The United States of America operates a racialized system that categorizes people by race and slots these races into a racial hierarchy that has whites at the top and

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blacks at the bottom (Omi and Winant, 1994; Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Steinberg, 2001; Patterson, 2005; Bashi-Treitler, 2013). This process of racialization¹ which has significant impact on black people's social relations and life chances, also creates a framework that oftentimes conflates race, ethnicity, and identity for black people into a single matrix, such that in many quarters of American society, black people are viewed as a monolithic group. As a result, ethnic diversity among black people is often underplayed, even as greater numbers of black immigrants and their children from the Caribbean and Africa are settling in America. But more attention has to be paid to the various ways black immigrants and their children interact with African Americans and integrate into American society. Doing so will increase our understandings of the nuances of race, how race interplays with ethnicity, and the meanings members of different black groups attach to blackness in the United States.

This article helps fill the gap in the literature on how ethnic diversity among black people plays out on the ground by studying slur usage between African Americans and members of the second generation of Nigerian/African ancestry, as reported by the Nigerian second generation.² I analyze data from respondents' descriptions of their relationships with African Americans during their school years. This data comes from semi-structured in-depth interviews with 75 adults of Nigerian ancestry in the United States. Respondents described their relations with African Americans during their school years as fraught, a period that ranged from the 1970s to early 2000s. Being the target of slurs from African Americans was one dimension of these fraught relations. My findings that the Nigerian/African second generation are targets of an ethnic slur used by African Americans and also appropriate the slur they use against African Americans as a socialization message in their Nigerian community provide crucial insight into how the black second generation are relating with African Americans and how they are balancing their racial status and ethnicity. My study of this period in the lives of the second generation also reveals several medium- and long-term consequences of the usage of slurs on the ethnic identities formed by the second generation of Nigerian/African ancestry.

In addition, the article extends the literature of ethnic slurs through its examination of slur usage among black ethnics in the United States. It adds another model to existing literature on slur appropriation. My findings reveal that slurs can be used by in-group members in a two-way process: In-group members direct a slur at out-group members in a derogatory and offensive way but also direct the same slur at other members of the in-group to help promote the solidarity of their own group.

This article brings the literature on slurs, race and ethnicity, and immigrant assimilation into conversation with each other by showing how slurs can become a critical part of the identity formation process. It increases our knowledge of how race interplays with ethnicity for black people in the United States. My findings also reveal that ethnic diversity within the black racial category in the United States is not solely due to the presence of contemporary (post 1965) first generation black immigrants but is being sustained into the second generation.

2. Theoretical framework

In this section, I discuss the studies that provide the theoretical framework for my analyses. The first subsection defines slurs and discusses slur appropriation. I point out the gap in the literature my analysis will attempt to fill in showing that slurs can be used in a two-way process by in-group users; specifically, they can be used to target members of an out-group and used by members of the in-group against other members of the in-group. The second subsection reviews several studies that show that young children understand race and use racial distinctions to create social hierarchies. I review this literature to establish the fact that the exchange of slurs by children can have long-lasting consequences. The third subsection discusses key identity theories used to guide my analysis. I frame this discussion in the context of ongoing immigration into the United States and the general use of slurs by ethnic groups.

2.1. Slurs and appropriation

Slurs usually derogate, ridicule, or demean members of a certain class by targeting certain properties or features associated with those members as a class (Croom, 2011, p. 353). According to Croom (2011), when a speaker uses a slur "the speaker intends to express (i) their endorsement of a (usually *negative*) *attitude* (ii) towards the *descriptive properties* possessed by the target of their utterance" (2011, p. 353). An ethnic slur is defined as any unfavorable, derisive, or disparaging jokes; name callings; anecdotes; sayings; rhymes; or riddles directed against an ethnic group (Garcia, 1976). Croom (2011, 2013) argues that a better way of understanding the literal meaning of a slur is to think of it in terms of a family resemblance conception of

¹ One definition of racialization is "those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities" (Miles, 1989, 75).

² I define the *second generation* as individuals who were born in the United States of at least one foreign-born Nigerian parent or who came to the United States at or before the age of twelve. I use the term *Nigerian/African ancestry* several times in the article because at those times I am extending the discussion to cover all African immigrants or second generation Africans. I do this because respondents made it clear that the slur *African booty scratcher* was directed at all black Africans and not just the Nigerian second generation. I also use the combined term *Nigerian/African ancestry* for two additional reasons. First, Nigerians are part of the larger African group. Second, most respondents included a pan-ethnic African identity in their slate of identities. They used the term *African* to refer to themselves, their parents, and individuals from other sub-Saharan African countries. They also used the term to delineate an ethnic boundary between themselves and African Americans (those descended from enslaved Africans held in the United States) and Afro-Caribbeans.

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