The influence of target group status on the perception of the offensiveness of group-based slurs ☆

P.J. Henry [a,*], Sarah E. Butler [b], Mark J. Brandt [c]

[a] Department of Psychology, New York University – Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
[b] Department of Psychology, The Sage Colleges, United States
[c] Department of Social Psychology, Tilburg University, Netherlands

HIGHLIGHTS

- We report two studies, one with experimental methodology.
- Slurs are seen as more offensive when directed at lower v. higher status groups.
- The effect is mediated by the expected emotional reaction of the target.

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ABSTRACT

Two studies investigate the effects of target group status on perceptions of the offensiveness of group-based slurs. Using real-world groups as targets, Study 1 showed that the perception that a group is of lower status in society is associated with the perceived offensiveness of insults targeting that group. Experimental methods in Study 2 showed that people perceive slurs against a low status group as especially offensive, a pattern that was mediated by the expectation that low-status targets would be emotionally reactive to the insult. The results suggest that cultural taboos emerge concerning insults against low-status groups that may be due in part to how those target groups are expected to respond emotionally to those insults.

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Introduction

On July 1, 2013, CNN aired a brief panel discussion with the headline "N-word vs 'Cracker': Which is worse?" in which the panel debated the offensiveness of one word used derisively toward Blacks compared to the other used against Whites. The panel concluded the obvious, that the "n-word" was more offensive than "cracker," but they struggled to explain why. Throughout the past decades, high profile cases have emerged of the use of ethnic slurs against Blacks by celebrities who have been censured or even lost their jobs or sponsorship for the act, including sportscaster Howard Cosell, radio personality Don Imus, comedian Michael Richards, and most recently celebrity chef Paula Deen (see Kurylo, 2013, for other vivid examples). In contrast, however, there are relatively few cases of public controversy over ethnic slurs lobbed against Whites. These examples point to an "offensiveness gap" when determining the offensiveness of slurs across different groups. What makes one group-based slur offensive but another innocuous?

The present paper is a response to a call for more research on taboo language, including understanding the forces that encourage and discourage their use (Jay, 2009). We consider the group-based status of the target as a basis for the offensiveness gap. This factor can explain the Black–White offensiveness gap described in the CNN example above, but can also be generalized across all target groups that vary in status.

Considering qualities of the target group: group-based status

We focus our attention on aspects of the target group, a component that to this point has received little attention. Qualities of target groups that have been studied include whether the target of an insult belongs to an ascribed group (e.g., ethnicity) versus an acquired group (e.g., obesity), with ethnicity-based slurs perceived as more socially harmful and deserving of greater punishment than obesity slurs (Boeckmann & Liew,

2002). Other target factors include characteristics of specifically ethnic groups, such that slurs directed against ethnic groups that are smaller in number and less familiar are perceived as less complex and more negative compared to slurs directed against ethnic groups that are larger and more familiar (Mullen, Rozell, & Johnson, 2000, 2001).

We extend this research to consider target group status, a factor relevant to all social groups. Although this factor has not been considered in the literature on group-based slurs and the offensiveness gap, there are clues in the existing literature as to its importance. Recent research has shown that dehumanizing words are more offensive when used against women, a lower status group compared to men (Haslam, Loughnan, & Sun, 2011). Furthermore, the finding that ethnic slurs are perceived as especially negative when directed at smaller groups that are less familiar (Mullen et al., 2001) may be a function of the lower status of the smaller groups, given that foreigners and ethnic minorities are typically lower in status in a country.[1] Thus we propose that one possible contextual influence on the offensiveness of a group-based slur is the group-based status of the target of the slur.

The causal direction could be the opposite, however, such that offensive group-based slurs could lead people to perceive target groups as lower in status. For example, a series of studies showed that when harsh ethnic slurs were directed against a hypothetical Black trial lawyer (Kirkland, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1987) or an actual Black interaction partner (Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985), participants were more likely to negatively evaluate the target (although the effect may be restricted to participants already holding anti-Black attitudes; Simon & Greenberg, 1996). Other studies have shown that priming derogatory slurs against gays leads to greater activation of negative associations with gays (Carnaghi & Maass, 2007), and the use of slurs against fictional groups leads to preferences of exclusion and greater social distance from those groups (Leader, Mullen, & Rice, 2009). These kinds of reactions may lead to a perception of lower social status of the groups being disparaged.

Why group-based status?

We predict that group-based slurs directed against members of a low-status group are especially likely to be perceived as offensive, and there are plausible reasons concerning participants' expectations of the reactions of the target that lead us to expect this pattern of results. First, participants may expect low-status targets to be emotionally reactive to an insult. Allport (1954) speculated about the "vigilance and hypersensitiveness" (p. 145) among members of oppressed social groups, and a growing literature has documented that members of low-status groups may be especially emotionally reactive to insults (Henry, 2009) and signs of disrespect (Henry, 2011) because they are more vigilant to threats and rejection (Henry, 2009; Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011; Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002) due to a lifetime of threatening experiences associated with prejudice and discrimination (Brandt & Henry, 2012; Henry, 2009). Vignette studies where participants read about a case of sexual harassment (Hunter & McClelland, 1991) and racial harassment (McClelland & Hunter, 1992) show that the inclusion of an emotional reaction from the target increases the judgment of the seriousness of the harassment. If others in society even anticipate the possibility of a greater emotional reaction to an insult from those of lower status groups, and see that such emotional reactions signal that an insult is offensive, then taboos could form surrounding the use of those insulting words.

A second possible mechanism concerning expectations of target reactions is the concern that the target of the insult will engage in activist behaviors in response to an insult. Members of low-status groups under certain circumstances may take individual or collective action against prejudice (e.g., Gurr, 1970; Runciman, 1966), and the broader society

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[1] There are exceptions, for example in some African countries.

may recognize the likelihood that members of low-status groups will protest or even press charges in response to group-based insults. Establishing taboos against expressing group-based slurs may help to avoid such protest and activism.

We explore the influence of both mechanisms in Study 2.

The importance of context

No given word in any language is inherently offensive. A word becomes an offensive slur because of the context in which it is used. For example, group-based slurs are seen as more offensive when directed against members of an outgroup compared to an ingroup (Asim, 2007; Haslam et al., 2011), with some offensive words even seen as endearing and a source of connection to others when spoken by one ingroup member to another ingroup member (Croom, 2011; Galinsky et al., 2013), as in the case for slurs relevant to gays (Bronski, 2011) and Blacks (Kennedy, 2002). Other work shows that the offensiveness of a group-based slur changes depending on the historical use of a word within a given context (e.g., in the evolution of the word "faggot" from meaning a bundle of twigs in Shakespeare's day to its modern usage as a slur towards gay men; Cresswell, 2009). Finally, cultural norms establish the injustice of targeting any group as the brunt of derisive slurs, such that within contexts that celebrate diversity and equality, taboos may form concerning group-based slurs more generally (e.g., Jeffries, Hornsey, Sutton, Douglas, & Bain, 2012). To focus on how the specific features of status of the target group plays a role in the offensiveness gap, we control for these contextual features in the two studies we present.

The present studies

This paper is one of a few empirical studies to consider how qualities of the target group itself determine the offensiveness gap, and the first to test the role of perceived group status of the targets of offensive words as a causal agent. In Study 1, we tested whether target group status matters at all in determining the perceived offensiveness of participant-generated slurs. In Study 2 we experimentally manipulated the group-based status of a target of a novel group-based slur to determine its causal influence on the perceived offensiveness of the slur, and tested two possible mediating mechanisms, expected emotional and behavioral reactions of the target.

In these studies our methods controlled for a number of alternative contextual variables that could influence the perceived offensiveness of a word. First, whereas in Study 1 we consider words that are used in the everyday lexicon and could have historical and learned influences in the meanings given to them, we control for this influence in Study 2 by using a novel offensive slur directed toward a novel group that would have no historical context for the participants to interpret. Second, we were specifically interested in what makes a group-based slur offensive when it has the *intention* of being offensive (as opposed to serving as a source of connection between ingroup members). Therefore, the instructions and manipulations in our studies were explicit about the offensive use of the words. Third, given that the emotional response to an insult can influence the judgment of the seriousness of an insult (Hunter & McClelland, 1991; McClelland & Hunter, 1992), we provided the participant with no such clues to the target's response to the insult, so that we could assess instead the participant's anticipation of both emotional and behavioral reactions.

Study 1

The first study was designed to test the prediction that slurs targeting groups that participants perceived as having lower social status would be seen as more offensive than slurs targeting groups participants perceived as having higher social status.