

# Perceptions of Racial Slurs Used by Black Individuals Toward White Individuals: Derogation or Affiliation?

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## Abstract

Research suggests that racial slurs may be “reclaimed” by the targeted group to convey affiliation rather than derogation. Although it is most common in intragroup uses (e.g., “nigga” by a Black individual toward another Black individual), intergroup examples of slur reappropriation (e.g., “nigga” by a Black individual toward a White individual) are also common. However, majority and minority group members’ perceptions of intergroup slur reappropriation remain untested. We examined White (Study 1) and Black (Study 2) individuals’ perceptions of the reappropriated terms, “nigga” and “nigger” compared with a control term chosen to be a non-race-related, neutral term (“buddy”), a nonracial derogative term (“asshole”) and a White racial slur (“cracker”) used by a Black individual toward a White individual. We found that the intergroup use of reappropriated slurs was perceived quite positively by both White and Black individuals. Our findings have important implications for research on intergroup relations and the reappropriation of slurs.

## Keywords

racial slurs, common in-group identity, social dominance theory, affiliation, derogation

Recent researchers have discussed and debated the semantic and pragmatic features of racial slurs with contention surrounding what is said and what is implied with the use of a racial slur. For example, racial slurs are terms that have historically been

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used to disparage, derogate, and disempower individuals belonging to different racial groups (i.e., expressive function; Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Camp, 2013; Croom, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). Because these terms have been used for so long and in such extreme ways, some researchers contend that it is impossible to separate the derogative potential from a racial slur regardless of the situation in which it is used (e.g., Anderson & Lepore, 2013). From an intergroup communication perspective, slurs used in this way function as a downward, divergent communication strategy (see Giles, 2016). These downward divergent behaviors in intergroup communication function to increase distance from minority group members and dissuade attempts of power attainment by minority groups.

Slurs used in this way call to mind negative stereotypes about the targeted group (see Jeshion, 2013; Merskin, 2010), which can function to justify prejudice toward targeted out-group members (see the justification-suppression model of prejudice; Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) and provide perceived legitimization of the status hierarchy (see system justification theory; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). It is in this way that racial slurs may function as a “sword,” meant to reinforce status hierarchies and cut down any attempt to subvert them (Rappoport, 2005). Indeed, this function of racial slurs expresses contempt toward the targets, alleging that they are despicable solely based on their race. As a result, being the target of a racial slur causes individuals to experience not only anger at the perpetrator but continued stress and feelings of devaluation due to the fear of being repeatedly victimized (Brandt & Henry, 2012; Dodson, 2014; Graumann, 1998; Haslam et al., 2011; Henderson, 2003; Kremin, 2017; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Mullen, 2001; Schneider et al., 2000).

Indeed, racial slurs may have extreme consequences for the target, but may also affect groups. Specifically, racial slurs identify the racial group membership of the targets in the attempt to not only disparage individuals but to also reinforce group-based hierarchies (see intergroup communication theories; Gallois et al., 2018; see also social identity theory; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It is in this way that racial slurs not only imply that the target is despicable, but in doing so, imply that the entire group is despicable (Croom, 2011; Leader et al., 2009; Mullen, 2004). For example, semantically, the terms “nigger” and “Black” both function to describe someone’s ethnicity as Black. However, “nigger” has historically been used as a slur to target Black individuals and implies extreme negative emotion meant to disparage the target. Given the abilities of racial slurs to both express negative emotions and to describe the target, this allows racial slurs to function to maintain status hierarchies by not only implying negative connotations toward the target but the group as a whole (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Hedger, 2012, 2013; Henderson, 2003; Hom, 2008; Jeshion, 2013; O’Dea & Saucier, 2017).

### *Racial Slurs Challenging Status Hierarchies*

Much of the existing research on racial slurs has focused on the disparaging function of racial slurs discussed above. However, racial slurs are often adopted and used by the group they were once meant to target as a means of affiliation and group bonding

(Bianchi, 2014; Galinsky et al., 2013; Rahman, 2012). This subversive use of slurs has not been fully empirically studied. Building on recent empirical evidence, we contend that racial slurs may have the potential to be intended and perceived to not only reinforce status hierarchies but also to subvert status hierarchies, foster group cohesion/affiliation, and potentially function to increase positive intergroup relations. Returning to theories on intergroup communication (see Giles, 2016), these terms are used in downward divergent ways by majority group members who seek distance from, and power over, minority group members. However, reappropriated slur use presents a novel perspective. Intragroup uses of reappropriated slurs (e.g., Black individual using “nigga” toward another Black individual) can be used in a convergent way, to affiliate. Thus, according to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and theories regarding slur reappropriation (e.g., Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2011), individuals belonging to the targeted group may bond and create group-based identities around a shared experience of prejudice as a way to fight against and cope with prejudice. It is in this way that racial slurs may be wielded as a “shield” to combat prejudice and status hierarchies rather than reinforcing them by way of the sword (Rappoport, 2005).

Recent empirical work has shown that, in using racial slurs affiliatively, minority group members feel more in control of the slurs and experience less negative effects from the slurs (Galinsky et al., 2013). Rappoport (2005) describes these effects and the motivations behind in-group use of racial slurs as a way that groups may inoculate themselves from prejudice. Specifically, Rappoport posits that, by using the terms affiliatively, and gaining exposure to the terms in a way that is nonderogative, minority group members may reduce the *sting* of these terms when used by out-group members, such as when White individuals target Black individuals with the use of racial slurs. This inoculation further enhances common in-group identities and promotes more positive in-group perceptions (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2012). It is in this way that racial slurs may be used to promote affiliation rather than to perpetuate degradation.

Gaertner and Dovidio (2012) also describe how this common in-group identity (see their common in-group identity model) can extend to other groups as well, promoting not only in-group cohesion, but intergroup affiliation as well. Theoretically, the common in-group identity model asserts that different social groups adopt a shared identity independent of each of their individual social identities. In extending this model to the current studies, we are not proposing that White individuals will self-label and self-identify as a “nigga.” In a similar vein, we do not expect that Black individuals who self-identify as “nigga” are appropriating the negative stigma of the term either. Instead, we contend based on the research presented that Black individuals’ appropriation of these terms is motivated to adopt an extended identity built around a shared bond in the fight against prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, the extension of this to a White individual is an extension of solidarity and acknowledgement of that ally in the fight against prejudice and discrimination toward a better intergroup social cohesion. This is a communicative strategy known as upward convergence, seeking to grow closer to someone of a higher status through intergroup affiliation (see Gallois et al., 2018; Giles, 2016). Thus, a shared cultural identity is created built on the foundation of affiliation rather than derogation. If this is the case, reappropriated terms

should be perceived as less derogative than a White racial slur or nonracial insult targeting a White individual and may even be perceived as affiliative. That said, according to communication accommodation theory (Giles, 2016), there are a number of factors that could affect this intergroup affiliation, including historical relations between the social groups/individuals and expectancy effects (see also Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996; Hubbert et al., 1999). If majority group members hold prejudicial attitudes toward, or negative stereotypes about, Black individuals, these processes may be inhibited. That said, the current studies are intended to be an initial investigation into White individuals' perceptions of reappropriated slur use by a Black individual toward a White individual.

## Current Studies Overview

In the current studies, we examined whether this affiliative function of racial slurs has the potential to improve relations not simply within groups, but between different racial groups as well, transcending racial boundaries. Specifically, in Study 1, we examined White participants' perceptions of Black racial slurs (e.g., "nigger," "nigga") compared with a White racial slur ("cracker"), a nonracial insult ("asshole"), and a control, nonracial, neutral term ("buddy"). It is important to note that we included both the "-er" and "-a" variants of "nigger." Although the "-a" variant is most commonly discussed in literature and popular culture as the reappropriated version, we did not want to make the assumption that only this slur is reappropriated or could function as a reappropriated term. As such, we included both terms and, while O'Dea et al. (2015) have shown differences in perceived offensiveness when these terms are used by a White individual toward a Black individual (with the "-a" variant being perceived as less offensive than the "-er" variant), because slur reappropriation is a largely novel social encounter, we did not make specific predictions about whether the "-a" variant would be perceived as more affiliative than the "-er" variant but expected this may be the case. In Study 2, we examined Black individuals' perceptions of the more commonly reappropriated slur ("nigga") compared with the White racial slur ("cracker") and nonracial insult ("asshole").

As an additional exploratory test and secondary research objective, we also varied the relationship between the Black and White individuals in Study 1 as being friends versus strangers. O'Dea et al. (2015) showed that racial slurs used by a White individual toward a Black friend are perceived as less derogative than racial slurs used by a White individual toward a Black friend. In the current studies, we expected this to replicate. However, we were also interested in whether slur condition would interact with relationship condition to provide additional information about the use of slurs by a Black individual toward a White individual. Because "nigger" and "nigga" were predicted to be positive terms of endearment rather than terms of disrespect, we wondered if the affiliative nature of these terms would be further enhanced when the individuals were friends or strangers. Thus, we were interested in testing whether the findings by O'Dea et al. (2015) generalized from slurs by majority group members toward minority group members to slurs by minority group members toward majority

group members. That said, we did not make specific predictions about the interaction between slur and relationship in Study 1. To our knowledge, these studies are the first to test whether racial slurs may have the potential to be intended and perceived as positive, potentially building affiliation between groups when used by Black individuals toward White individuals.

## Study 1

Study 1 was conducted using a 2 (relationship)  $\times$  5 (slur) between-groups design in which participants read vignettes describing a Black perpetrator using a racial slur to refer to a White target. We manipulated the relationship between the Black perpetrator and the White target as being friends versus strangers. We also manipulated the racial slur used as either a Black racial slur with differing levels of offensiveness (“nigger,” “nigga”), a White racial slur (“cracker”), a nonracial slur (“asshole”), or a nonracial descriptor (“buddy”). With our first hypothesis, we predicted that Black racial slurs used by a Black individual to target a White individual would be perceived as more affiliative and less derogatory than would White racial slurs and nonracial insults. Furthermore, because our studies are the first to study slurs used by Black individuals toward White individuals, we did not make specific predictions about differences between “cracker” and “asshole,” but with our second hypothesis, we expected both of these slurs to be perceived as more derogatory and offensive than the control term, “buddy.” That said, it is possible that there may be no differences between “cracker” and “asshole” if majority group members’ position in the status hierarchy functions to shield them from prejudicial language or if “cracker” is not a valenced enough term to elicit heightened levels of negativity compared with non-group-based terms. We also did not make specific predictions about differences in perceptions between the reappropriated slur, “nigga,” and “buddy.” However, because we are predicting a possible affiliative function of racial slurs, we expected these terms may be somewhat similarly perceived or, at a minimum, the differences between these terms would be smaller than the differences between “buddy” and “cracker”/“asshole.”

## Method

**Participants.** Participants who indicated their ethnicity was something other than White were excluded from analyses because we were interested in examining White individuals’ perceptions of slurs used by Black individuals toward White individuals. Subsequently, 324 White participants were recruited online via the SONA systems software at a Midwestern state research university and via Amazon mechanical Turk software. Given the novelty of the current research, we did not have theoretical basis for expected effect sizes. Therefore, we chose our sample size based on social psychological conventions encouraging approximately 30 participants per cell in an experimental design (e.g., Wilson VanVoorhis & Morgan, 2007). While this is not an ideal sample size justification, the current study was conducted in the Spring of 2016 near the beginning of the time in which the need for more concrete justifications of

power and sample size were required. That said, we calculated necessary sample size requirements for a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) global effects test using GPower with an effect size  $f^2(V) = .0625$ , power = .80, 10 groups, and 4 response variables (120 participants). We also exceeded sample size recommendations for the subsequent analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests probing the significant MANOVA with a medium effect size = .25, power = .80, 4 numerator degrees of freedom, and 10 groups (196 participants). It should be noted that we checked whether the method of recruitment (i.e., via SONA systems versus Mechanical Turk) interacted with any of our manipulated variables in predicting participants' perceptions of the slur. These effects showed, while there were main effects of recruitment on some dependent variables, recruitment did not interact with either relationship or slur in predicting our set of dependent variables.<sup>1</sup> To check the quality of the data since there were no attention checks included, we removed 21 participants who spent less than at least 2 seconds responding to each item and at least 8 seconds reading the vignette which were standards chosen to be a bare minimum needed to read the items. Of the 303 remaining participants, 114 participants self-identified as male, 183 self-identified as female, and 6 participants self-identified as "other." The average age of participants was 30.58 years ( $SD = 12.34$ ).

*Vignette.* We used the vignette used by O'Dea et al. (2015) in which two individuals were playing in a basketball game, and following the game winning shot, one referred to the other using a slur. However, rather than a White individual using a slur toward a Black individual (O'Dea et al., 2015); in this study, the vignettes depicted a Black individual using a racial slur toward a White individual. Participants were presented with images of the Black and White individuals (to convey the individuals' races) and then read the vignette. Additionally, to ensure participants did not assume prototypical use of racial slurs (i.e., White individuals using racial slurs to target Black individuals) or otherwise confuse the two individuals, we altered the names of the individuals in the vignettes, along with their images, to be stereotypically White (Mason) and stereotypically Black (DeShawn). In the vignettes, we manipulated the relationship between the Black perpetrator and White target as being friends versus strangers, as well as manipulating the racial slur used to target the White individual as being a Black racial slur with differing levels of offensiveness ("nigger," "nigga"), a White racial slur ("cracker"), a nonracial slur ("asshole"), or a nonracial descriptor ("buddy"). The full vignette is presented below as it was presented in the friends, "nigger" condition, alternative conditions are provided in square brackets.

Mason and DeShawn are friends on the same intramural basketball team. Today they played a game against another intramural team [Mason and DeShawn are on different intramural basketball teams. They have never met before. Today their teams played against one another.]. The game was tied 20-20 with 2 minutes left in the game. Both teams had been playing well throughout the game, but as it progressed both teams had gotten more competitive. As the clock counted down the final seconds, DeShawn dribbled the ball toward the hoop. Mason was running close to DeShawn. DeShawn stopped just outside of the 3-point line and shot. The ball went in, scoring

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Each of the Dependent Measures of Study 1.

|                            | M (SD)      | 1       | 2       | 3       | 4     |
|----------------------------|-------------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| 1. Perceived offensiveness | 4.81 (2.10) | (.92)   |         |         |       |
| 2. Descriptive nature      | 3.15 (2.22) | .38***  | (.75)   |         |       |
| 3. Derogative              | 4.28 (2.80) | .63***  | .42***  | (.95)   |       |
| 4. Affiliative/respect     | 3.93 (2.55) | -.55*** | -.27*** | -.75*** | (.97) |

Note. Bivariate correlations and Cronbach's alphas (in parentheses on the diagonal) for the measures are shown in the right half of the table.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Mason and DeShawn's [DeShawn's] team 3 points. DeShawn turned to Mason and said, "Swish, nigger [nigga][cracker][asshole][buddy]."

**Measures.** Items on each of the following scales were completed by participants using 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) scales. A composite score was calculated for each of these variables by averaging the items on each scale after reverse coding anti-thetical items. Responses were scored such that higher scores represented higher levels of the construct being measured. Reliabilities are in Table 1. A principal components analysis was conducted including each of the following measures<sup>2</sup>. While these are different theoretical constructs, they are similar and we wanted to ensure they did not overlap. The items generally loaded onto the hypothesized factors, with the exception of the affiliative and respect shown measures loading onto one factor. Therefore, we have combined these two measures for all analyses for this study and have omitted the respect criterion variable in Study 2. We retained the label "affiliation."

**Perceived offensiveness of the racial slur.** To examine the extent to which individuals perceived the racial slur as offensive, we used the scale created by O'Dea et al. (2015). The Perceived Offensiveness of the Racial Slur scale is a 10-item scale consisting of items such as, *this type of language is offensive* and *this type of language is antisocial*.

**Descriptive nature of the racial slur.** To examine the extent to which participants perceived the racial slur as being intended to describe the target individual, we used a slightly modified scale created by O'Dea and Saucier (2017). This scale was included to measure whether participants perceived the different slurring terms to be descriptive of the targeted individual which we would expect only "cracker" to be given he was a White individual. This scale was largely included as an exploratory analysis. It was possible that participants may have perceived the term "nigga" to somehow be descriptive of how the White individual interacts with Black individuals (presumably positively) and is, somehow then, descriptive of them. One item from the original scale was removed. The removed item would have read, *This term was meant to describe Mason's skin color*. Due to ambiguity surrounding Mason's "skin color," this item was omitted a priori. This scale consisted of three items, *This term was meant to*

*describe Mason's ethnicity; This term was not meant to describe Mason; and DeShawn used this term to describe what Mason looks like.*

**Derogation.** To measure participants' derogative perceptions of the slur, we used a scale created by O'Dea and Saucier (2017). This scale consists of four items, *This term meant to insult Mason; This term was used to express negative emotion toward Mason; DeShawn said this to hurt Mason's feelings; DeShawn used this term to get Mason angry.*

**Affiliation.** To examine the extent to which participants perceived the racial slur as being used to affiliate with the target of the slur, we used a scale created by O'Dea and Saucier (2017). This scale consists of four items, *DeShawn used this term because he thought that it would show Mason that they could be friends; DeShawn was trying to be nice to Mason; DeShawn used this term in a friendly way toward Mason; This term was used by DeShawn to bond with Mason.*

**Respect shown by the perpetrator of the racial slur.** We created items to examine the extent to which participants perceived the racial slur as being used as a sign of respect toward the target individual. These items were designed to examine the potential for racial slurs to be used affiliatively and as a sign of respect as suggested by previous research on slur reappropriation which we wondered if it would be different, statistically from just affiliative perceptions (Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2011; Galinsky et al., 2013; Rahman, 2012). As we discussed, however, there was little statistical rationale for maintaining these as separate predictors. This scale consists of two items including, *DeShawn said this out of respect for Mason; and Mason should take this as a sign of respect from DeShawn.*

**Procedure.** Participants were recruited via the SONA systems software at a Midwestern state university and via Amazon's Mechanical Turk software. They then completed the study on Qualtrics. Participants first provided their informed consent. They were then shown the randomly assigned vignette. Following the presentation of the randomly assigned vignette, participants reported their perceptions of the slur on the measures described above. Participants then completed the demographic variables (age, race, sex, year in school, hometown, and home state) and were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## Results and Discussion

To examine the effects of racial slur and relationship on our dependent variables, we conducted a 2 (relationship: friends, strangers)  $\times$  5 (slur: "nigger," "nigga," "cracker," "asshole," and "buddy") between-groups multivariate analysis of variance. Recall, we predicted that Black racial slurs ("nigger," "nigga") used by a Black individual toward a White individual would be perceived as significantly less offensive than White racial slurs ("cracker") and nonracial insults ("asshole"). Means and standard deviations are



**Table 2.** Multivariate and Univariate ANOVAs Results for Slur  $\times$  Relationship Effects for Dependent Measures of Study 1.

| Variable         | MANOVA,<br><i>F</i> (16, 887) | ANOVA, <i>F</i> (4, 293)   |                       |            |                         |
|------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|------------|-------------------------|
|                  |                               | Perceived<br>offensiveness | Descriptive<br>nature | Derogative | Affiliative/<br>respect |
| Relationship (R) | 84.96***                      | 43.63***                   | 10.26**               | 184.75***  | 303.96***               |
| Slur (S)         | 33.80***                      | 51.90***                   | 75.81**               | 20.78***   | 26.11***                |
| R $\times$ S     | 2.56**                        | 0.24                       | 1.59                  | 2.17       | 4.56**                  |

Note. ANOVA = analysis of variance; MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance. *F* ratios are Wilks' approximation of *F*.

\*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

presented in Table 1. We found a significant effect of relationship on our set of dependent variables, Wilks'  $\lambda = .46$ ,  $F(4, 290) = 84.96$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .54$ . The univariate ANOVAs examining the effects of relationship on each of our dependent variables are presented in Table 2. Replicating results by O'Dea et al. (2015), our results suggested slurs used between strangers were perceived as significantly more offensive, derogative, and descriptive; and as significantly less affiliative than slurs used between friends. More important, these results extend the extant literature by showing that this effect holds even in situations in which a Black individual uses a racial slur to target a White individual. We also found a significant effect of slur predicting scores on our set of dependent variables, Wilks'  $\lambda = .23$ ,  $F(16, 887) = 33.80$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .31$ . The univariate ANOVAs examining the effect of racial slur on our dependent variables are presented in Table 2. We found significant effects of racial slur on each of our dependent variables. We probed these main effects by examining the Bonferroni pairwise comparisons to examine the differences between racial slurs for each of the dependent variables (Table 3).

The only racial slur perceived to be significantly more descriptive of the target individual was "cracker." There were no significant differences found between "nigger," "nigga," "asshole," and "buddy." These results suggest that only White racial slurs were perceived to be more descriptive of White individuals when used by a Black individual. Our results suggest that racial slurs do have the potential to be perceived (and perhaps intended to be used) descriptively when used to target the group they were originally intended to target, suggesting that racial slurs have not lost all descriptive qualities. These results are consistent with Croom's (2011, 2014) research, but inconsistent with Hedger's (2012, 2013) contentions that slurs have evolved to the point that they no longer possess any descriptive qualities and function solely as explicatives meant to disparage. More important to the current hypotheses, we then examined the pairwise comparisons for the extent to which participants perceived the use of the racial slurs as offensive, derogative, and affiliative toward the White target. These comparisons provided a test of our hypothesis that Black racial slurs used by Black individuals toward White individuals would be perceived as more affiliative and less

**Table 3.** Mean Scores on the Dependent Measures as a Function of Racial Slur of Study 1.

| Measure                 | Slur condition     |      |                    |      |                   |      |                   |      |                   |      |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------|--------------------|------|-------------------|------|-------------------|------|-------------------|------|
|                         | Nigger             |      | Nigga              |      | Cracker           |      | Asshole           |      | Buddy             |      |
|                         | M                  | SD   | M                  | SD   | M                 | SD   | M                 | SD   | M                 | SD   |
| Perceived offensiveness | 5.60 <sub>ab</sub> | 1.63 | 5.28 <sub>ab</sub> | 1.79 | 5.92 <sub>a</sub> | 1.80 | 5.08 <sub>b</sub> | 1.78 | 2.36              | 1.26 |
| Descriptive nature      | 2.36 <sub>a</sub>  | 1.55 | 2.16 <sub>a</sub>  | 1.27 | 6.35              | 2.27 | 2.73 <sub>a</sub> | 1.27 | 2.31 <sub>a</sub> | 1.36 |
| Derogative              | 4.10 <sub>a</sub>  | 2.67 | 3.82 <sub>a</sub>  | 2.80 | 5.40 <sub>b</sub> | 2.88 | 5.58 <sub>b</sub> | 2.62 | 2.66              | 1.96 |
| Affiliative/respect     | 4.00 <sub>a</sub>  | 2.40 | 4.16 <sub>a</sub>  | 2.50 | 3.12 <sub>b</sub> | 2.09 | 2.68 <sub>b</sub> | 1.81 | 5.53              | 2.83 |

Note. Means in a row sharing subscripts are not significantly different from each other. For all measures, higher means indicate higher scores on the measure.

derogatory than White racial slurs and nonracial insults. Consistent with our hypotheses, both “nigger” and “nigga” were perceived to be less derogative, and more affiliative than were White racial slurs and nonracial insults. Interestingly, “nigger” and “nigga” were not shown to be significantly different from “cracker” and “asshole” in terms of participants’ perceived offensiveness of the slur. This may indicate participants understand the power of the words and the ability of the words to offend, but, as indicated by participants’ perceptions of these slurs as less derogative, and more affiliative, realize the intention to disparage may differ depending on context as predicted by our hypotheses. Specifically, participants may be perceiving our derogative and affiliative perception measures as being more situationally affected than our offensiveness measure which could be due to the way these items were worded, “This type of language is offensive” versus “This term meant to insult Mason.”

Furthermore, while participants generally perceived “nigger” and “nigga” more positively and less negatively than “cracker” and “asshole,” they generally did not perceive these terms as substantially positive either. That said, they did not condemn the terms either; they were rated quite low on the derogative perceptions ( $M_s < 4.10$ ). This may indicate either a lack of understanding about intention when a Black individual uses a reappropriated slur toward a White individual. Or, these findings may indicate differences of opinion among White individuals in how positively these slurs are perceived which is also supported by the large standard deviations among these dependent variables for the reappropriated slurs. Last, these findings may indicate indecision on the part of White participants about the implications of these terms. While participants did not seem to condemn the terms, they also did not seem eager to encourage their use. These implications will be explored further in Study 2 and discussed in the General Discussion.

Finally, Study 1 did not reveal substantial evidence that the effect of slur used by a Black individual toward a White individual is dependent on the relationship between the two individuals except in the case of the affiliative/respect criterion variable. We probed this significant effect by examining the simple effect of relationship in each of the slur conditions with Bonferroni adjustments. The only significantly stronger effect

of relationship was that the effect of relationship in the buddy condition was significantly larger than the effect of relationship in the “asshole” condition as evidenced by nonoverlapping 95% confidence intervals (“asshole” = [1.15, 2.82], “buddy” = [3.36, 4.96]). Thus, it does not appear that the effect of relationship changes depending on whether a reappropriated Black racial slur or a White racial slur is used by a Black individual toward a White individual.

Taken together, our findings suggest that slurs used between friends are perceived as less offensive, less derogative, and more affiliative than slurs used between strangers. This finding provides increased support for O’Dea et al. (2015) findings that the effects of racial slurs are situationally dependent by showing generalization from just slurs used by majority group members toward minority group members, to slurs used by minority group members toward majority group members and reappropriated slurs. Furthermore, our findings support our hypotheses based on slur reappropriation that reappropriated slurs used by the minority social group toward the majority social group are perceived more positively by majority group members. It appears that majority group members perceive this use as a sign of inclusion and respect rather than a sign of derogation and disrespect that the slur was originally intended to be.

## **Study 2**

In Study 2, we extended the findings of Study 1 by examining Black individuals’ perceptions of racial slurs used by a Black individual toward a White individual. This allowed us to examine whether these slurs are generally intended positively versus negatively by the group that is using them in our vignette, further testing the implications of subversive slur use. Specifically, we manipulated the racial slur being used as a Black racial slur (“nigga”), a White racial slur (“cracker”), and a nonracial insult (“asshole”). We then measured participants’ perceptions of the slur as offensive, derogative, and affiliative. Our choice to limit the slur to these three terms was due to difficulty recruiting an all-Black sample of participants of adequate size to assess perceptions of all of the slurs used in Study 1. Building on previous research and the findings of Study 1, we predicted “nigga” would be perceived as significantly less offensive and derogative and more affiliative than “cracker” and “asshole.”

## **Method**

*Participants.* Participants were recruited via Amazon’s TurkPrime software (Litman et al., 2016). This study was conducted with other studies examining perceptions of racial slurs by our research team. For each of these studies, demographic information was collected at the beginning of the survey and if participants reported their race as Black, they participated in the current study and if they responded with another race, they participated in the other studies for our research team. Recruitment procedures and the name of the study were identical across these studies except for a number at the end of the study name. Our goal recruitment was at least 150 participants to achieve

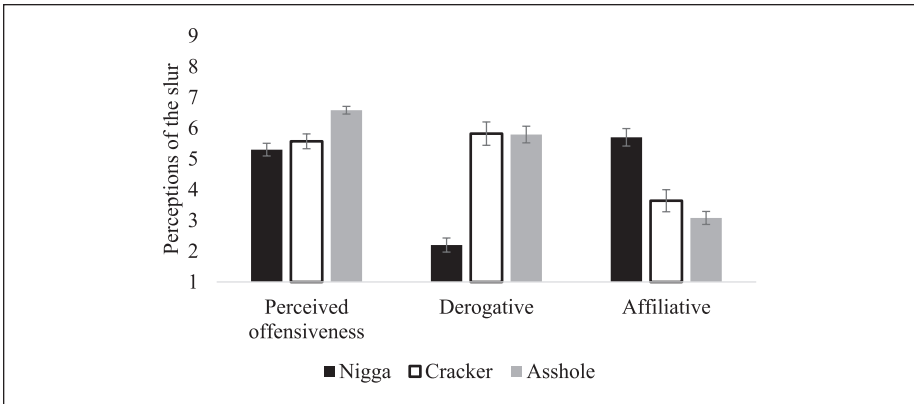
recommendations of at least 50 participants per cell for experimental research (Simmons et al., 2013). However, we were limited to the number of participants who indicated their ethnicity as Black in the other studies. This goal sample size also exceeded the sample size recommendation from a GPower power analysis with a medium effect size of  $f = .25$ , power = .80, and three groups (159 participants). We had an initial sample of 248 Black participants. However, 37 of these participants failed, or did not answer, the manipulation checks identifying the race of the perpetrator and target of the slur in the vignette. Therefore, our final sample of participants was 211 United States-based Black participants (53 men, 158 women) with an average age of 34.77 years ( $SD = 11.97$ ).

**Vignette.** We used a vignette similar to that used by O'Dea and Saucier (2017). The vignette depicted an interaction between a White and Black individual at the entrance of a restaurant. We manipulated the slur being used by the Black individual toward a White individual as “nigga,” “asshole,” or “cracker.” The full vignette is as follows in the “nigga” condition.

DeShawn and Mason are going to a restaurant to eat dinner. Mason drives to the restaurant. After Mason parks his car he walks over to the door of the restaurant. Mason then sees DeShawn come from around the corner close by. He holds the door open for DeShawn. DeShawn walks through the door and says, “thanks, nigga” to Mason.

**Measures.** The dependent measures in the current study included the perceived offensiveness, perceived derogative, and perceived affiliative perceptions of the racial slur measures used in Study 1. Again, the respect criterion measure used in Study 1 was not used in Study 2. Each of these was again measured on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) scale. Antithetical items were reverse-scored and then averaged to create composites such that higher composite scores represented higher levels of the construct being measured. We also included one item assessing the extent to which participants perceived this as being something that DeShawn would realistically say to Mason ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 2.54$ ); with no significant differences between the slurs in a univariate ANOVA,  $F(2, 208) = 1.55$ ,  $p = .215$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .02$ . This item was included to ensure that participants were evaluating the slurs based on similar perceptions of realism, and to also provide insights into how likely Black participants perceive that a Black individual would actually use these terms toward a White individual. The average on this item is a bit lower than we expected it would be and could indicate that participants are ambivalent about the use of racial slurs and the appropriateness of their use in society.

**Procedure.** Participants for the current study were recruited via Amazon's TurkPrime software. They then completed the study on Qualtrics online survey software. Following provision of informed consent, participants completed demographic items (race, sex, age, year in school, hometown, home state). Participants who indicated they were Black participated in the current study. Participants who indicated a race other than



**Figure 1.** Participants' perceptions of the slurs used in Study 2 as offensive, derogative, and affiliative.

Note. Error bars represent standard error.

Black participants participated in different studies. Black participants were then shown a randomly assigned vignette and reported their perceptions of the slur as offensive, derogative, and affiliative. Participants were then debriefed and thanked.

### Results and Discussion

We hypothesized “nigga” would be perceived as significantly less offensive and negative, and significantly more positive, than “cracker” and “asshole,” when used by a Black individual toward a White individual. To test these hypotheses, we conducted a MANOVA. Slur was entered as the independent variable and perceived offensiveness, perceived derogative perceptions, and perceived affiliative perceptions were entered as the dependent variables. The MANOVA yielded a significant main effect of slur predicting participants' perceptions of the slurs, Wilks'  $\lambda = .40$ ,  $F(6, 412) = 17.89$ ,  $p < .001$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .21$ . We then examined the univariate effects of slur for each of the dependent measures. There was a significant effect of slur predicting participants' perceptions of the slur as offensive,  $F(2, 208) = 16.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .14$ ; derogative,  $F(2, 208) = 43.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .29$ ; and affiliative,  $F(2, 208) = 25.27$ ,  $p < .001$ , *partial*  $\eta^2 = .20$ . We then probed these univariate effects using Bonferroni pairwise comparisons. These effects are shown in Figure 1. For the perceived offensiveness of the slur, “nigga” ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) was not perceived significantly different than “asshole” ( $M = 5.57$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ),  $p = 1.00$ ,  $d = .16$ ; but both were perceived as significantly less offensive than “cracker” ( $M = 6.58$ ,  $SD = 5.98$ ),  $ps < .001$ ,  $d = .90$  and  $d = .67$ , respectively. These findings are somewhat consistent with our hypotheses that “nigga” used by a Black individual toward a White individual would be perceived as significantly less offensive than “cracker” and “asshole.” That said, it may be that participants' perceptions of racial slurs as offensive are

much less situationally dependent than their perceptions of racial slurs as derogative and affiliative. This could be due to the way these items are worded (i.e., “this type of language is offensive”). This wording invites fewer judgments about situational uses of racial slurs than does the wording from our derogative measure (i.e., “This term was meant to insult Mason”). Consistent with our hypotheses, “nigga” ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) was perceived as substantially less derogative than both “asshole” ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 2.83$ ),  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.54$ ; and “cracker” ( $M = 5.79$ ,  $SD = 2.71$ ),  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.58$ ; which were not significantly different from each other,  $p = 1.00$ ,  $d = .01$ . “Nigga” ( $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ) was perceived as significantly more affiliative than both “asshole” ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 2.59$ ),  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .86$ ; and “cracker” ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 2.14$ ),  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.22$ ; which were not significantly different from each other,  $p = .452$ ,  $d = .24$ .

Interestingly, it appears that, while participants do not describe reappropriative slur use negatively (i.e.,  $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 1.74$  on a 9-point Likert-type scale), participants may be apprehensive to describe reappropriative slur use as positive (i.e.,  $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 2.17$  on a 9-point Likert-type scale). These findings are consistent with the findings of Study 1. However, it appears that Black individuals describe this use as more positive than do White individuals. We conducted exploratory analyses in which we reverse scored the derogative perceptions measure and compared the value with participants' perceptions of the slur as affiliative. Admittedly, while the affiliative and derogative items are similar, they are not identical, and these analyses should not be overinterpreted. That said, there was a substantial difference between the recoded derogative perceptions of the slur ( $M = 7.80$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) and participants' affiliative perceptions of the slur ( $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ),  $t(57) = -6.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.07$ . There is also a visual difference in the spread of data (i.e., 0.43 difference in the standard deviations) for these two measures, possibly indicating a higher degree of ambivalence about the positivity of reappropriative slur use. These results are consistent with recent research examining perceptions of subversive racial humor (see Miller et al., 2019) showing that participants do not report high levels of condemnation of subversive racial humor but, potentially due to a lack of understanding of its function, do not report high endorsement of subversive racial humor.

Taken together, our findings indicate that Black participants do not perceive the reappropriative use of “nigga” by a Black person toward a White person to be negative. These findings are consistent with the common in-group identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2012). This model and theoretical discussion on functions of reappropriative slur use (i.e., echoic perspective; Bianchi, 2014; Spotorno & Bianchi, 2015) suggests that the reappropriative use of “nigga” by a Black person toward a White person could be done as a sign of respect, indicating an extension of one's in-group. As such, the current findings have important implications for intergroup relations such that intergroup reappropriative slur use between a Black and White individual may be intended and perceived as a positive encounter, building a common in-group identity, rather than a hierarchy-reinforcing derogative function that slurs typically possess when used by a majority group member negatively toward a minority group member.

## General Discussion

Previous research has primarily focused on prototypical uses of racial slurs (i.e., White individuals using Black racial slurs toward Black individuals) and their potential to derogate or offend. However, racial slurs are not always intended or perceived negatively. Indeed, recent research suggests that racial slurs may not always be intended and perceived negatively (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Henry et al., 2014; Jeshion, 2013). Instead, social groups may reappropriate racial slurs to use among their in-group as a means of affiliation and to inoculate one's group from racial prejudice (Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2011; Galinsky et al., 2013; Rahman, 2012). Furthering this research on slur reappropriation, we examined how Black racial slurs (vs. White racial slurs) used by Black individuals toward White individuals are perceived by White individuals (Study 1) and Black individuals (Study 2) to test whether these slurs could be effective uses of upward convergence in intergroup communication (see Giles, 2016, for an overview). Our results showed that Black racial slurs used by Black individuals toward White individuals are perceived as less negative, and more positive and showing of respect, than are White racial slurs and nonracial insults by both White (Study 1) and Black (Study 2) participants. It is important to note, these slurs were still perceived as more derogative and less affiliative than our control term, "buddy" by White individuals. As such, there may be ambivalence about these terms or some White individuals may be resistant to these terms.

### *Limitations*

Because our studies were conducted online cross-sectionally using vignettes, our results may not extend to real life scenarios. In person, people examine facial cues (e.g., smiling) which may indicate more affiliative usage or even more derogative usage. Due to the lower level of ambiguity provided by posture and facial cues in real situations, we would expect that the effects would be stronger in real situations where individuals are able to use social cues (e.g., nonverbal behavior by the perpetrator, reactions by the target) to gauge the perpetrator's intent in using racial slurs as antisocial or prosocial. Admittedly, this is speculation and future research should examine these potential effects by presenting participants with video in which a Black individual uses a slur toward a White individual.

Furthermore, although care was taken to increase the generalizability of our findings, our vignettes were situated in two specific social instances, a basketball game, in which there could be differences in competitiveness between the friends and strangers conditions which could have influenced our results, and an encounter between friends at a restaurant. The current studies also do not allow us to examine whether reappropriation is a necessary component to the increased level of affiliation shown when Black individuals use a racial slur toward a White individual. Changing the vignette between the two studies also limits the comparison of the effects for White individuals with the effects for Black individuals. Future research should address this limitation by

examining how perceptions of various Black racial slurs in terms of their degrees of reappropriation affect the perceived intention of perpetrator of these racial slurs to affiliate or derogate, and whether White individuals perceive these terms similarly to how Black individuals perceive the terms. A final limitation concerns the generalization of these findings to other cultures. The current studies were conducted in the United States which has a history of racial prejudice and the use of slurs like “nigger” being used derogatively toward Black individuals. Admittedly, the use of these terms has decreased in recent decades. However, these terms are still used. Future research should examine the extent to which historical contexts of denigration against minority group members affects perceptions of slur reappropriation to further enhance the generalization of our findings to different contexts/cultures.

An additional limitation concerns the slurs that were used. Arguably, the terms (i.e., “cracker,” “nigga”) are not equivalent in the negative effects, historical denigration toward marginalized groups, and saliency in modern society. That said, this was not our intention, nor did we pretest these terms to ensure equivalency. While this is certainly a limitation that can affect the interpretation of our findings, our intention was not to find equivalent group-based slurring terms. Instead, our intentions were to examine how participants’ perceptions of reappropriated terms compared with neutral terms and terms which slur the targeted group to show that these are distinct terms that, to some level, may promote affiliation between the group reappropriating the term and the group who they are using it toward.

### *Implications*

Our research questions are novel and provocative. No published studies have examined perceptions of slurs used by members of the social group they were originally intended to target toward members of other social groups as a communicative strategy for increasing closeness with out-group individuals. The current studies should inspire future research to examine the various ways that references to race and prejudice may be used to affiliate rather than to derogate, such that references to traditional hierarchies may actually subvert them (e.g., Saucier et al., 2016; Saucier et al., 2018; Strain et al., 2016). That said, as recent research by Miller et al. (2019) has shown and our current findings suggest, the subversive use of racial slurs and racial humor seems to be controversial (or at least surrounded by ambivalence, hesitancy, or indecision). People do not report very high levels of condemnation of these uses of racial slurs and humor. However, people also seem reluctant to voice support for these uses of racial slurs and humor as well. Future research should examine the motivating factors surrounding participants’ indecision about the uses of reappropriated racial slurs. It could be that (White individuals especially) are motivated to appear nonprejudiced to others (see Aversive Racism Theory; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Nail et al., 2003; see also research by Plant & Devine, 1998, on motivations to appear nonprejudiced to others).

An additional point of discussion surrounds the use of the term “slurs” throughout this article. Throughout, we have used this term in the interest of clarity and due



to its use in previous research on these terms. However, one could argue that, if these terms are used positively and perceived positively, the term “slur” may not be accurate in these situations, because they may not be intended or perceived to actually slur the target individual. This would be especially true for terms such as “queer” which has been reappropriated to such an extent that much of the derogative aspect of the term is gone. Instead, colleges, universities, and people have embraced the term as a term of endearment rather than derogation and disrespect. As such, the use of these terms may have transcended derogative and descriptive boundaries, the possibility for which has yet to be discussed in the literature describing the semantics and pragmatics of racial slurs. This may provide a basis for an additional functional category such that terms which were once offensive may have the potential to now be special terms of endearment that bestow honorary in-group status to out-group members. This new category requires the existing “expressivist” perspective (see Croom, 2011, 2014, 2015; Hedger, 2012, 2013; Hom, 2008, 2010) to be split into affiliative and derogative functions. However, our studies do show that the descriptive potential is lost when the term is no longer used toward the group it was originally used to target. Therefore, the “compromise” perspective (Croom, 2014) contending that racial slurs have not lost all descriptive abilities and may function to both derogate as well as describe should be extended to derogate, affiliate, and describe the target.

A linguistic review detailing the possible functions of these terms and the possibility for them to no longer be referred to as “slurs” in some instances, including the current use, is warranted and would be an interesting avenue for future research. This review would need to further situate affiliative versus derogative slur use as linguistic communicative strategies for promoting convergence and divergence in intergroup interactions. Much of the existing work on intergroup communication (e.g., Gallois et al., 2018) has focused on accents, nonverbal behaviors, apparel, posture, and so on, as markers of intergroup communication intentions. We contend that word choice, and the employment of slurs presents a novel possibility for the continued denigration of, but also potential affiliation between, social groups.

An additional avenue for future research centers on the motivations that White individuals higher in racial prejudice are likely experiencing compared with White individuals who are lower in prejudice. From an identity standpoint, calling a White individual “nigga,” does not change the individuals’ race. However, in an intergroup context, we contend that this could be an extension of one’s in-group—creating a secondary in-group identity between the Black and White individual that transcends racial boundaries. Building on theoretical discussion by Abrams et al. (2002), we would predict that White individuals who identify highly with their in-group will be more likely to interpret encounters with Black individuals as an intergroup encounter, while people who do not identify as highly with their in-group will not be as likely to interpret encounters with Black individuals as intergroup encounters. If intergroup slur use is perceived as more of an intergroup encounter, and specifically, if it is perceived as threatening to one’s position by someone highly identified with their in-group with animosity toward the out-group, some

White individuals may find the subversive use of racial slurs to be threatening to their position in the status hierarchy. Research on social dominance theory (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), intergroup (integrated) threat theory (Aberson & Gaffney, 2008), the justification-suppression model of prejudice (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), the self-esteem hypothesis within social identity theory (Abrams & Hogg, 1988), and system justification theory (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012) suggest that majority group members are motivated to maintain social distance from minority group members. If this distance (i.e., proximity, salience, cross-group friendships) is infringed on, majority group members experience threat and this threat is associated with increased discrimination toward minority groups as a way to establish and maintain group boundaries. Thus, majority group members may be resistant to the subversive use of racial slurs, especially when it is used to affiliate across group boundaries. Future research should examine whether White individuals experience threat following the use of racial slurs used by Black individuals toward White individuals and whether this then leads to more negative perceptions of the slur. It is possible that, if this is the case, White individuals higher in prejudice may use their experiences of threat as justification for prejudice toward marginalized groups (e.g., Duckitt, 2006; Duckitt & Sibley, 2007; Kauff et al., 2013; Miller et al., in press; Saucier et al., 2017; Stephan & Stephan, 2000).

## Conclusion

Our research examined the novel possibility that racial slurs may be used prosocially. While all previous research to our knowledge focused on prototypical uses of racial slurs (i.e., White perpetrators toward Black targets), we examined the reappropriated use of racial slurs by Black individuals toward White targets. Our results showed that Black racial slurs that have been reappropriated are perceived as more affiliative and less derogatory (by both White and Black participants) than are White racial slurs and nonracial insults when used by Black individuals toward White individuals. The current studies extend previous research on racial slurs by applying the theories regarding communication and the reappropriation of stigmatizing slurs to a novel examination of racial slurs used toward individuals outside the group traditionally targeted by the slurs. Thus, it is important to consider and explore the potential for racial slurs, traditionally weapons used to wreak social division and exclusion, to be used as tools to build intergroup affiliation and inclusion.

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## Notes

1. Full statistical reporting of the effects including the interactions between slur, relationship, and recruitment method (SONA systems software vs. Amazon’s Mechanical Turk software) can be provided on request from the corresponding author.
2. Full statistical reporting of the principal components analysis is available on request from the primary author.

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**Donald A. Saucier** is a professor in psychology at Kansas State University. His research interests centered on expressions of antisocial and prosocial behavior. Specifically, he is interested in the individual differences and situational factors that contribute to the justification and suppression of antisocial behavior (e.g., prejudice, aggression), as well as to decisions to behave prosocially (e.g., to give or withhold help).