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Negative emotions versus target descriptions: Examining perceptions of racial slurs as expressive and descriptive

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Abstract

There is a debate about whether racial slurs operate primarily as descriptives (of the ethnicity of targets) or expressives (of negative emotions toward targets). In three studies (overall $N = 471$), we examined whether different racial slurs used in different situations led to slurs being perceived as descriptive versus expressive, and whether this distinction was related to the perceived offensiveness of the slurs. Our results showed the descriptive and expressive natures of racial slurs are directly related to their perceived offensiveness. Specifically, as the perceived offensiveness of slurs increase in intensity, the slurs are perceived as more negatively expressive, more descriptive, less positively expressive, and comparatively less descriptive and more expressive.

Keywords

descriptive, discrimination, expressive, justification, prejudice, racial slurs, suppression

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There is an ongoing debate about whether slurs operate solely as expressives (i.e., expressing negative emotions toward targets) or if slurs also function as descriptors (i.e., describing the targets). On one side, Hedger asserts that racial slurs (e.g., “nigger”) have evolved to the point that they possess no descriptive potential, and instead, are used, and perceived, solely to express negative emotions toward the targets (Hedger, 2012, 2013). Others argue that racial slurs carry extreme negative connotations, but possess descriptive qualities that pure explicatives (e.g., asshole) lack (Blakemore, 2014; Croom, 2011, 2014; Jeshion, 2013). Research by O’Dea et al.

(2015) examined the perceived offensiveness of different racial slurs (e.g., “nigger” vs. “nigga”) in different situations (e.g., racial slurs used between friends vs. strangers). Their results showed different slurs, and slurs used between friends versus strangers, led to differences in the perceptions of the slurs as offensive.

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However, research has not examined whether different slurs used between friends versus strangers result in their being perceived as more expressive and more descriptive by third-party observers. It is important to note, we are not examining the actual intent of the perpetrator of the slur; rather, we are examining third-party perceptions of the use of racial slurs. Due to ethical and practical concerns, we are not able to examine the intent of a perpetrator of a slur. Further, because racial slurs are used in social contexts, and may therefore have important social impacts on the norms regarding expressions of prejudice, and may provide cues for perceptions of the perpetrators and intended targets, the perceptions of their use by third-party observers is an important area of research. Therefore, we designed the current studies to extend the descriptive/expressive debate by examining whether different racial slurs in different situations are perceived to have differing levels of descriptive and expressive natures by third-party observers. Additionally, we examined whether the perceived expressive and descriptive natures of the slurs are related to individuals' perceptions of the slurs as offensive.

Racial Slurs

Racial slurs are often used to express negative emotions toward members of another race (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Camp, 2013; Croom, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Hom, 2010a, 2010b). Slurs may also function to describe the individuals they are targeting. For example, referring to individuals as "Black" describes their ethnicity. The term "nigger" may also describe the targets' ethnicity as Black. However, the term "nigger" may also express severe negative emotions toward its targets. In fact, "nigger" has been identified as the most offensive racial slur (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2011; Jeshion, 2013; Kennedy, 2002; Vallée, 2014), and has been referred to as the "filthiest, dirtiest, nastiest word in the English language" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 23).

Overt forms of prejudice have declined in recent decades (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002;

Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981; Murrell, Dietz-Uhler, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Drout, 1994; Nail, Harton, & Decker, 2003; Sydell & Nelson, 2000) due, at least in part, to societal pressure to respond without prejudice toward outgroup members (Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002; Plant & Devine, 1998). However, racial slurs continue to be used by majority group members to disparage outgroup members (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Merskin, 2010). Racial slurs can have direct negative effects on the targets (e.g., decreased self-esteem, stress/anxiety from fear of repeated victimization; Mullen, 2001, 2004; Schneider, Hitlan, & Radhakrishnan, 2000), and may have indirect negative consequences for the targets if overheard by others (e.g., lower career advancement due to negative perceptions; Gabriel, 1998; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985).

Thus, societal norms dictate that racial slurs should not be used to disparage individuals on the basis of their ethnicity, and strong societal norms inhibit these expressions of prejudice. However, racial slurs are still used to target members of minority groups, leading many researchers to examine why racial slurs and other overt forms of prejudice are still expressed (e.g., Saucier, Webster, O'Dea, & Miller, 2017). We predict the justification-suppression model (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) may explain the continued use of racial slurs. The justification-suppression model of prejudice asserts that individuals have underlying feelings of genuine prejudice which will either be expressed or suppressed depending on the strength of situational justification and suppression factors (i.e., factors that increase or decrease the likelihood prejudice will be expressed, respectively). As discussed, societal norms decrease the likelihood prejudice will be expressed. However, when individuals perceive expressions of prejudice to be less offensive, suppression factors will be lower and justification factors will be higher, increasing the likelihood prejudice will be expressed (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002). Therefore, it is imperative to examine factors influencing individuals' perceptions that overt

expressions of prejudice (in this case, racial slurs) are more acceptable.

As discussed by O'Dea et al. (2015), perceiving racial slurs as less offensive may justify their use. This will, in turn, increase the likelihood that Whites will use racial slurs to target minority group members (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Crandall et al., 2002). We hypothesized the extent to which racial slurs are perceived as expressive and descriptive would be related to their perceived offensiveness, such that as racial slurs are perceived as less descriptive and as expressing more negative emotion toward targets, they would be perceived as more offensive. Therefore, to understand factors that influence the suppression (or lack thereof) of racial slurs, it is important to examine factors that influence the perceived descriptive and expressive qualities of racial slurs. In their study, O'Dea et al. (2015) manipulated both the racial slur used and relationship between the target and perpetrator of the slur as friends versus strangers to examine whether these factors affected the perceived offensiveness of the slur. Therefore, building on this previous research, we examined whether the relationship between two individuals (as friends or strangers) and the racial slur that is used (e.g., "nigger," "nigga") affected third-party perceptions of racial slurs as expressive versus descriptive.

Offensiveness of Racial Slurs

The varying levels of offensive intensity associated with racial slurs may allow for better understanding of what leads individuals to perceive racial slurs as expressive and descriptive. As noted previously, research indicates that not all slurs are equal in perceived offensiveness (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2011; Henry, Butler, & Brandt, 2014; Jeshion, 2013). In other words, referring to a Black individual as a "nigger," versus referring to him/her as a "nigga," produces different levels of perceived offensiveness (O'Dea et al., 2015), and these perceptions are related to previously held prejudices about the target group (Simon & Greenberg, 1996). With

the current research, we hypothesized the extent to which participants perceived the use of racial slurs as descriptive and expressive would be related to their perceived offensiveness of the slurs. Therefore, we hypothesized that, because racial slurs have been previously shown to differ in their perceived offensiveness, they would also differ in the extent to which they were perceived as descriptive and expressive. Specifically, we predicted that more offensive racial slurs (e.g., "nigger") would be perceived as significantly more negatively expressive and less descriptive than less offensive slurs (e.g., "nigga"). Further, we predicted that racial slurs used between friends would be perceived as more negatively expressive and less descriptive.

Intent of the perpetrator has also been linked to individuals' perceptions of offensiveness (Cushman, 2008; Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003; Woolfolk, Doris, & Darley, 2006). The intent of the perpetrator is situationally dependent, and the perception of a perpetrator's intent involving the use of racial slurs has been linked to the punishment of violent crimes (Saucier, Hockett, & Wallenberg, 2008). Thus, the extent to which one uses a racial slur to express contempt toward the target, rather than to describe the target, may be situationally dependent. As a result, there has been speculation about the linguistic functions of racial slurs, examining what is linguistically expressed and what is functionally descriptive in their use (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Hedger, 2013; Henderson, 2003; Hom, 2008; Jeshion, 2013).

Semantic Versus Pragmatic Nature of Racial Slurs

Research literature has discussed what is implied about the targets by racial slurs (i.e., slurs' pragmatic meaning) and/or how slurs are used as functional descriptors of the targets' ethnicity (i.e., slurs' semantic meaning; Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Hedger, 2013; Henderson, 2003; Hom, 2008; Jeshion, 2013). Specifically, this has created three

possible points of view. First, a descriptive perspective could state that racial slurs are solely descriptive and exclusively refer to targets' ethnicity. If this were the case, perceptions of slurs as expressive would be very low and would not change depending on the slur or the relationship between the target and perpetrator of the slur. Second, an expressivist perspective could state that racial slurs may have evolved to the point that they no longer may be used descriptively, functioning solely as explicatives to express negative emotion toward targets. If this were the case, perceptions of slurs as descriptive would be very low and would not change depending on the slur or the relationship between the target and perpetrator of the slur. Third, a compromise perspective could state that racial slurs primarily derogate, but may also describe the targets, and that these perceptions may be situationally dependent. If this were the case, our results would show varying levels of perceived descriptive and expressive natures of racial slurs as the slur and relationship between the perpetrator and target of the slur varied.

No one has solely argued for a descriptive perspective in the literature due to the inherent and continued capacity of racial slurs to offend. However, there are proponents of the expressivist perspective. The expressivist perspective notes that calling someone a "nigger" is not the same as calling the person "Black" (Hedger, 2012, 2013). Hedger argued the term "nigger" does nothing more than imply the person is lazy and unmotivated, expressing dislike of the target. Specifically, authors in favor of this view note slurs are not different from explicatives, suggesting that calling someone a "nigger" would be similar to calling that person an "asshole." In essence, there is no descriptive capacity of racial slurs; they are solely used to express negative emotion. Summing up this viewpoint rather well, Hedger states, in reference to racial slurs, that "their offensiveness projects through almost any type of linguistic construction" (Hedger, 2012, p. 74).

However, problems with this view have been raised (Croom, 2011, 2014, 2015; Hom, 2008).

Noting important differences between explicatives and slurs (Jay & Jay, 2015), these authors argue the purely expressivist perspective is inherently flawed (Hom, 2010a, 2010b). Croom (2011, 2014) argued that while slurs express negative emotions, slurs may be used to describe the ethnicity of the target. For example, calling someone a "nigger," in certain circumstances, may function to describe the individual's ethnicity as Black. Croom (2014) argues that, consistent with others' speculation (e.g., Leader, Mullen, & Rice, 2009; Mullen, 2004), racial slurs are too complex to be defined as solely descriptive or expressive. Instead, racial slurs are used to both derogate and describe. In making this argument, Croom asserts slurs possess a "conceptual anchor" that maintains their potential to be used descriptively (Croom, 2015). Croom (2014) suggests a compromise between the two sides, arguing that while slurs primarily express negative emotions toward targets, they also describe the ethnicity of the targets.

Overview of Current Studies

In our current studies, we extended this debate by examining third-party perceptions of the use of racial slurs as descriptive and expressive. We conducted three studies to examine factors that may influence the perceptions of racial slurs as descriptive and expressive. Consistent with the justification-suppression model of prejudice, we hypothesized the extent to which individuals perceived the use of racial slurs as offensive would be correlated with the extent to which they perceived the slurs as expressive and descriptive. Therefore, because O'Dea et al. (2015) found both the slur and relationship status between two individuals impacted the perceived offensiveness of the racial slur, we included these independent variables in the current studies. It is important to clarify we are examining third-party perceptions of the function(s) of racial slurs and not the actual intent of the perpetrators of slurs. Specifically, we examined White observers' perceptions of different racial slurs used between friends versus strangers as expressing negative

emotions toward, and describing, Black targets. We hypothesized different racial slurs would differ in terms of their perceived expressive versus descriptive natures. Specifically, we hypothesized that as the perceived offensiveness of racial slurs increased, they would be perceived as more expressive and less descriptive. Therefore, building on research by O'Dea et al. (2015), we hypothesized the term "nigger" would be perceived as more expressive and less descriptive than "nigga," and these perceptions would be related to participants' perceived offensiveness of the slur.

In Study 1, we replicated and extended the findings by O'Dea et al. (2015) by examining whether different racial slurs ("nigger," "nigga") used between friends versus strangers resulted in differences in the perceptions of racial slurs as descriptive and expressive. In addition, we examined whether the extent to which racial slurs were perceived as descriptive and expressive were related to participants' perceptions of the slurs' offensiveness. In Study 2, we replicated the results of Study 1 with a nonstudent sample. We also extended these results by including semantic differential response scales on which participants were asked to choose whether the racial slurs were used more to describe the targets versus to express negative emotion toward the targets. Further, we examined whether this distinction was related to the perceived offensiveness of the racial slurs. In Study 3, we replicated and extended the findings of Studies 1 and 2 by examining whether these effects were consistent for different racial slurs in a different setting. Specifically, we extended our examination of racial slurs to include "nigger," "negro," "porch monkey," "homie," and "brother." Additionally, we altered the vignette to be a noncompetitive situation to examine the generalizability of our findings to other social situations.

Study 1

In Study 1, we examined whether different racial slurs used between friends versus strangers affected individuals' perceptions of the slurs as descriptive, positively expressive (i.e., used to

affiliate), and negatively expressive (i.e., used to insult). We included this measure of positive expressiveness due to racial slurs' potential to be used positively (e.g., to show group affiliation via slur reappropriation; Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2011; Galinsky et al., 2013; Rahman, 2012). Therefore, we expected that positive expressiveness would be negatively related to, and negative expressiveness would be positively related to, the perceived offensiveness of racial slurs. Additionally, we examined whether these perceptions of racial slurs as descriptive, positively expressive, and negatively expressive were related to the extent to which participants perceived the use of the racial slurs as offensive. Similar to the design used by O'Dea et al. (2015), the design of our current study was a 2 x 2 between-groups design in which we presented participants with vignettes in which we manipulated both the racial slur being used between two individuals (as "nigger" vs. "nigga") as well as the relationship between the two individuals (as friends vs. strangers).

Method

Participants. Ninety-four participants were recruited through SONA Systems software at a large Midwestern state university. All participants (45 male, 49 female) were White and completed the study online. Participation was limited to White participants because we were interested in White observers' perceptions of racial slurs. Participants received course credit toward a research requirement for a general psychology class. The average age of the participants was 19.04 ($SD = 1.56$).

Vignettes. We presented participants with the vignette used in O'Dea et al.'s (2015) study in which a White individual (named "Alex") used a racial slur toward a Black individual (named "Sam") after making the game-winning shot in a basketball game. The relationship between the two individuals was manipulated as friends or strangers and the racial slur was manipulated as "nigger" or "nigga." The full vignette is next (the portions in brackets denote the other conditions):

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for dependent measures of Study 1.

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Offensiveness	5.64 (1.61)	(.88)			
2. Descriptive	4.38 (2.23)	.60**	(.87)		
3. Negatively expressive	3.70 (2.41)	.68**	.58**	(.98)	
4. Positively expressive	4.18 (2.92)	-.64**	-.46**	-.73**	(.95)

Note. Bivariate correlations and Cronbach's alphas (on the diagonal) for the measures are in the right half of the table. ** $p < .01$.

Sam and Alex are friends on the same intramural basketball team. Today they played a game against another intramural team. [Sam and Alex are on different intramural basketball teams. They have never met before.] 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 Alex dribbled the ball toward the hoop. Sam was running close to Alex. Alex stopped just outside of the 3-point line and shot. The ball went in, scoring Alex and Sam's [Alex's] team three points. Alex then turned to Sam and said, "Swish, nigger [nigga]."

Measures. The measures were completed online. After providing informed consent, participants answered demographic information (e.g., ethnicity, class year, age, sex). They then read the vignette and completed the measures. Participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation. Unless otherwise stated, each measure was assessed on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) scale. Composite scores were calculated by averaging scores on each measure with higher scores representing higher levels of the construct being measured. Reliabilities are shown in Table 1.

Perceived offensiveness of the racial slur. To measure participants' perceived offensiveness of the racial slur used by Alex toward Sam, we used O'Dea et al.'s (2015) Perceived Offensiveness of the Racial Slur Scale. This scale consists of 10 items

(e.g., "This type of language is normal" [reverse scored] and "This type of language is offensive").

Descriptive nature of the racial slur. We created four items to assess participants' beliefs about the extent to which the racial slur described the target's ethnicity in the context of our vignette (e.g., "This term was meant to describe Sam's ethnicity").

Positive expressive nature of the racial slur. We created four items to assess participants' beliefs about the extent to which the racial slur was used to express positive emotion toward the target in the context of our vignette (e.g., "This term was used by Alex to bond with Sam").

Negative expressive nature of the racial slur. We created four items to assess participants' beliefs about the extent to which the racial slur was used to express negative emotion toward the target in the context of our vignette (e.g., "This term meant to insult Sam").

Results and Discussion

To examine the effects of slur and relationship on each dependent variable, we conducted a between-groups multivariate analysis of variance. The means for the various conditions are illustrated in Figure 1. Racial slur and relationship were entered as independent variables, and composite scores for the perceived offensiveness, descriptiveness, negative expressiveness, and positive expressiveness of the racial slur were entered as dependent variables. A significant main effect of slur emerged, Wilks' lambda = .80, $F(4, 87) = 5.39$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .20$. Examination of

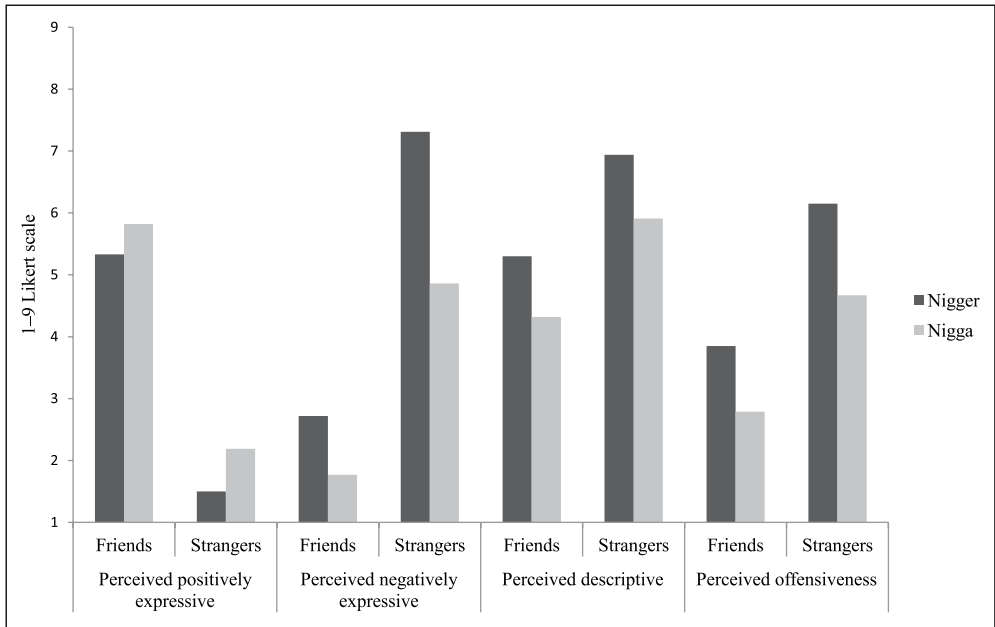


Figure 1. Perceptions of racial slurs (Study 1).

the univariate analyses of variance assessing the effects of slur on each of our dependent variables showed that “nigger” (vs. “nigga”) was associated with significantly higher scores on perceived descriptiveness, $F(1, 90) = 10.37, p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$; perceived negative expressiveness, $F(1, 90) = 16.14, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$; and perceived offensiveness, $F(1, 90) = 13.37, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$. “Nigger” (vs. “nigga”) also was associated with marginally lower scores on perceived positive expressiveness, $F(1, 90) = 3.52, p = .06$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$.

A significant main effect of relationship also emerged on our set of dependent variables, Wilks’ lambda = .35, $F(4, 87) = 40.74, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .65$. Examination of the univariate analyses of variance assessing the effects of relationship on each of our dependent variables showed that racial slurs used between strangers (vs. friends) were associated with significantly higher scores on perceived descriptiveness, $F(1, 90) = 28.04, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .24$; perceived negative expressiveness, $F(1, 90) = 82.55, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .48$; and perceived

offensiveness, $F(1, 90) = 34.166, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .28$. Racial slurs used between strangers (vs. friends) were associated with significantly lower scores on perceived positive expressiveness, $F(1, 90) = 140.32, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .61$.

No Slur x Relationship interaction emerged on our set of dependent variables, Wilks’ lambda = .96, $F(4, 87) = 0.97, p = .43$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Therefore, this interaction was not probed further. This indicated the effect of relationship was consistent across each of the racial slurs (and vice versa) on our dependent variables. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1.

We further examined whether perceived offensiveness of the racial slur was related to the extent to which individuals perceived the racial slur as descriptive, positively expressive, and negatively expressive. Bivariate correlations are shown in Table 1. Each of these relationships was significant at the $p < .001$ level. The extent to which individuals perceived the racial slur to express positive emotion toward the target was negatively correlated with perceived offensiveness of the racial slur. Both the extent to which individuals

perceived the racial slur to be descriptive and negatively expressive were positively correlated with perceived offensiveness of the racial slur.

Consistent with our hypotheses, different racial slurs were shown to produce differing perceptions of racial slurs as descriptive, negatively expressive, and, consistent with research by O'Dea et al. (2015), offensive. Also consistent with our hypotheses, as the extent to which participants perceived the racial slur as expressing negative emotions toward the target increased, the perceived offensiveness of a racial slur increased. Interestingly, and contrary to our hypotheses, the perceived descriptive nature of the racial slur was also positively related to the perceived offensiveness of the racial slur. We further examined why this may be the case and concluded that our measures of the descriptive and expressive nature only measured the extent to which participants perceived the slurs as expressive and descriptive independently (i.e., they did not allow us to directly compare the perceived functions of the racial slur). Therefore, this study did not allow us to examine directly whether different racial slurs used between friends versus strangers were perceived as more expressive versus more descriptive. Instead our results showed racial slurs were perceived as both more descriptive and more expressive as the perceived offensiveness increased. These results are consistent with Croom's (2011, 2014) hypotheses that racial slurs function as both expressives and descriptives. However, we were interested to examine whether, as the perceived offensiveness of the racial slurs increased, the racial slurs would be perceived as more expressive and less descriptive relative to one another. Thus, we conducted an additional study to examine whether participants perceive the use of different racial slurs in different situations as more expressive versus more descriptive when asked to make a relative choice between the two functions of the slur using a semantic differential scale.

Study 2

We designed Study 2 to replicate and extend the results of Study 1 with a nonstudent sample by

including items which asked participants to compare the expressive and descriptive nature of the racial slurs. As in Study 1, we examined whether this comparison was related to the extent to which participants perceived the racial slurs as offensive. Specifically, we examined whether different racial slurs used between friends versus strangers were related to the extent to which individuals perceived the use of the racial slurs as descriptive and expressive, as well as comparatively more descriptive versus more expressive on a semantic differential scale. We also examined whether this distinction was related to the perceived offensiveness of the racial slurs. Similar to Study 1, the design of Study 2 was a 2 x 2 between-groups design in which we presented participants with vignettes in which we manipulated both the racial slur being used between two individuals (as "nigger" or "nigga") as well as the relationship between the two individuals (as friends or strangers).

Method

Participants. Ninety-two participants from the United States were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical TURK software. All participants (58 male, 33 female, one transgendered) were White, completed the measures online, and were given 15 cents for their participation. The average age of the participants was 32.71 ($SD = 10.48$).

Measures. As in Study 1, the measures were completed online. Participants provided informed consent and reported demographic information (e.g., ethnicity, age, sex). They then read the same manipulated vignette used in Study 1 and by O'Dea et al. (2015), and proceeded to the dependent measures. The same measures (the descriptive nature, positive expressiveness, negative expressiveness, and perceived offensiveness of the racial slur) from Study 1 were used along with additional semantic differential scales. Participants were then debriefed and thanked for their participation. Reliabilities are shown in Table 2.

Descriptive versus expressive nature of the racial slur. We designed descriptive and expressive

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for dependent measures of Study 2.

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Offensiveness	5.86 (1.87)	(.91)				
2. Descriptive	4.86 (2.47)	.67**	(.87)			
3. Negatively expressive	3.89 (2.85)	.60**	.70**	(.97)		
4. Positively expressive	4.40 (2.44)	-.50**	-.55**	-.69**	(.90)	
5. Descriptive versus expressive	4.89 (2.06)	.44**	.38**	.69**	-.59**	(.91)

Note. Bivariate correlations and Cronbach's alphas (on the diagonal) for the measures are in the right half of the table.
** $p < .01$.

scale anchors to assess the extent to which participants perceived the racial slur as being used more to express negative emotions versus more to describe the target. We created four items to examine participants' beliefs about the extent to which the racial slur was used to describe, or to express negative emotions toward the target individual, in the context of our vignette. We included items on a semantic differential scale from 1 (descriptive anchor; e.g., Alex used this term primarily to describe Sam's ethnicity) to 9 (expressive anchor; e.g., Alex used this term primarily to express negative emotion toward Sam because of his ethnicity). We then averaged the responses to create a composite score such that lower scores represented higher levels of perceived descriptiveness, and higher scores represented higher levels of perceived expressiveness, of the slur.

Results and Discussion

To examine the effects of slur and relationship on each of our dependent variables, we conducted a between-groups multivariate analysis of variance. The means for the various conditions are illustrated in Figure 2. Racial slur and relationship were entered as independent variables and composite scores for perceived descriptiveness, perceived negative expressiveness, perceived positive expressiveness, and perceived offensiveness of the racial slur, as well as the descriptive versus expressive nature of the racial slur, were entered as dependent variables. No main effect of slur emerged on our set of dependent variables, Wilks' lambda = .93, $F(5, 84) = 1.21$, $p = .31$,

partial $\eta^2 = .07$. We further examined the univariate analyses of variance effects of slur on our dependent variables to examine whether these effects generally replicated the findings of Study 1. The univariate analyses of variance showed that "nigger" (vs. "nigga") was associated with marginally higher scores on perceived offensiveness, $F(1, 88) = 3.90$, $p = .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$; and significantly higher scores on perceived descriptiveness, $F(1, 88) = 4.18$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. Additionally, "nigger" (vs. "nigga") predicted marginally lower scores on positive expressiveness, $F(1, 88) = 3.82$, $p = .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. There was no effect of slur on perceived negative expressiveness, $F(1, 88) = 2.67$, $p = .11$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$; or more descriptive versus more expressive nature of the racial slur, $F(1, 88) = 1.39$, $p = .24$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. However, in examining the data, these results suggested similar trends to Study 1 with "nigger" (vs. "nigga") being related to generally higher scores on expressiveness, descriptiveness, and perceived offensiveness.

Similar to Study 1, a significant main effect of relationship emerged on our set of dependent variables, Wilks' lambda = .50, $F(5, 84) = 17.00$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .50$. Examination of the univariate effects of relationship on our dependent variables showed that racial slurs used between strangers (vs. friends) were associated with significantly higher scores on perceived descriptiveness, $F(1, 88) = 19.63$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .18$; perceived negative expressiveness, $F(1, 88) = 73.14$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .45$; and perceived offensiveness, $F(1, 88) = 36.68$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$. Racial slurs used between strangers were associated with significantly lower scores on

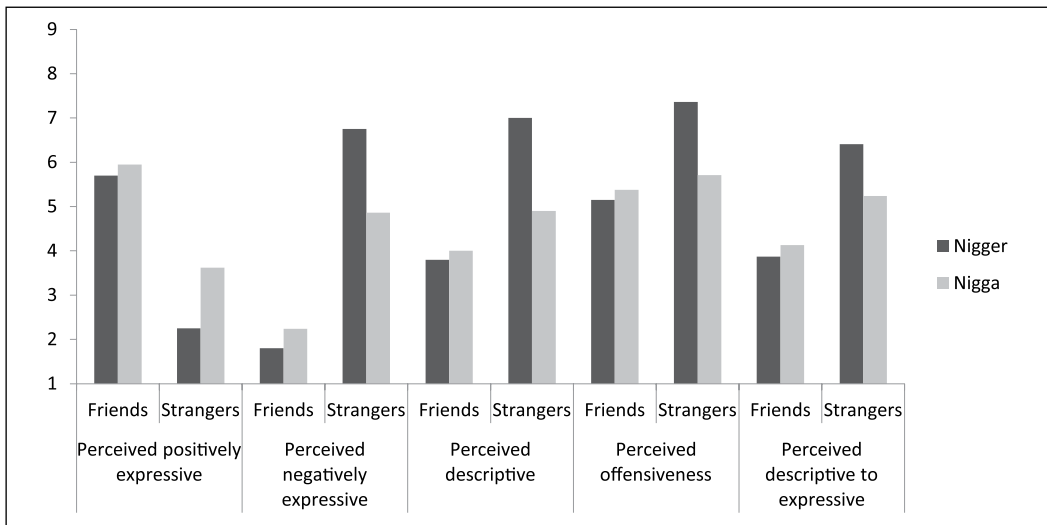


Figure 2. Perceptions of racial slurs (Study 2).

perceived positive expressiveness, $F(1, 88) = 48.90, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .36$. Racial slurs were also perceived to be significantly more expressive versus more descriptive when used between strangers versus friends, $F(1, 88) = 22.24, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .20$. These results are similar to those found in Study 1 such that racial slurs used between strangers (vs. friends) were perceived to be more offensive, expressing more negative emotion, and used to describe the target's ethnicity significantly more.

Similar to Study 1, no significant Slur x Relationship interaction emerged on our set of dependent variables, Wilks' lambda = .96, $F(4, 87) = 0.97, p = .43$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. This means that, again, the effect of relationship was consistent across each racial slur (and vice versa) for our dependent variables. Therefore, this interaction was not probed further. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.

We further examined whether the extent to which individuals perceived the racial slurs as descriptive, positively expressive, and negatively expressive was related to the perceived offensiveness of the racial slur and, more importantly for the current study, the extent to which individuals perceived the slur to be descriptive versus expressive. Bivariate correlations are shown in Table 2.

Each of these relationships was significant at the $p < .001$ level. The extent to which individuals perceived the racial slur to express positive emotion toward the target was negatively correlated with perceived offensiveness of the racial slur. Further, as the extent to which individuals perceived the racial slur to be both descriptive and expressing negative emotion toward the target increased, perceived offensiveness also increased. However, when asked to decide between the two, individuals perceived the racial slur to be more expressive and less descriptive when the perceived offensiveness of the slur was higher.

Study 3

The results of Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate different racial slurs used between friends versus strangers are perceived with differing levels of perceived expressive and descriptive capacities. However, the vignette presented to participants could have been confounded by a competitive difference between the target and perpetrator of the racial slur. Additionally, in Studies 1 and 2, we used only two racial slurs. Therefore, we designed Study 3 to replicate the results of Studies 1 and 2 with a different vignette to examine whether the effects from Studies 1 and 2 would generalize to

a situation that did not involve competition. Additionally, we examined whether other racial slurs also varied in perceptions of their expressive and descriptive capacities. Specifically, we created vignettes in which a White individual and a Black individual entered a restaurant at the same time and the White individual used a racial slur toward the Black individual. The design of Study 3 was a 2 x 5 between-groups design in which we presented participants with vignettes in which we manipulated both the racial slur used (as “nigger,” “negro,” “porch monkey,” “homie,” or “brother”) as well as the relationship between the two individuals (as friends or strangers). Similar to our previous studies, we predicted slurs used between friends would be perceived as significantly less offensive, less negatively expressive, more positively expressive, and relatively more descriptive and less expressive. We do not have specific hypotheses about these racial slurs due to their never having been directly compared empirically. However, due to speculation by Anderson and Lepore (2013) and findings from O'Dea et al. (2015), as well as our previous two studies, we expect that different slurs are likely to differ in their perceived offensiveness, as well as their descriptive and expressive natures. Yet, which exact slurs will differ from each other remains to be explored. Further, we predicted the perceptions of racial slurs as descriptive and expressive would be related to their perceived offensiveness.

Method

Participants. Two hundred eighty-five participants from the United States were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk software. The majority of participants were White (77.5%). All participants (127 male, 154 female, 2 transgendered, 2 identified as other) completed the measures online and were given 10 cents for their participation. The average age of the participants was 32.85 ($SD = 12.23$).

Vignettes. We presented participants with a vignette similar to that used in O'Dea et al.'s

(2015) study in which a pictured White individual (named “Alex”) uses a racial slur toward a pictured Black individual (named “Sam”). However, we changed the story from a basketball game to an encounter between a Black individual and a White individual while they entered the same restaurant. The relationship between the two individuals was manipulated as friends or strangers, and the racial slur was manipulated as “nigger,” “negro,” “porch monkey,” “homie,” or “brother.” The full vignette is next (the portions in brackets denote the other conditions):

Sam and Alex are friends who plan to meet up at a restaurant to eat dinner with their other friends [Sam and Alex are strangers who each are headed to a restaurant to eat dinner]. Sam drives to the restaurant excited to see his friends. After Sam parks his car he walks over to the door of the restaurant. He then sees Alex come from around the corner close by. He holds the door open for Alex who walks through the door and says, “thanks, nigger” [“negro,” “porch monkey,” “homie,” “brother”].

Measures. As in Studies 1 and 2, the measures were completed online. Participants provided informed consent, read the vignette, and then completed the dependent measures. The same measures (perceived offensiveness, descriptiveness, positive expressiveness nature, negative expressiveness nature, and descriptive to expressive nature) from Study 2 were used. Participants reported demographic information (e.g., ethnicity, age, sex). Participants were then debriefed and thanked for their participation. Reliabilities are shown in Table 3.

Results and Discussion

To test the effects of slur and relationship on predicting scores on our dependent variables, we conducted a 2 (relationship: friends, strangers) x 5 (slur: “nigger,” “negro,” “porch monkey,” “homie,” “brother”) between-groups multivariate analysis of variance. The results are displayed in

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for dependent measures of Study 3.

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Offensiveness	5.31 (2.40)	(.94)				
2. Descriptive	5.22 (2.59)	.69**	(.88)			
3. Negatively expressive	3.91 (2.87)	.74**	.65**	(.97)		
4. Positively expressive	4.94 (2.66)	-.74**	-.63**	-.82**	(.93)	
5. Descriptive versus expressive	5.22 (1.97)	.55**	.34**	.67**	-.60**	(.83)

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

** $p < .01$.

Figure 3. A significant main effect of relationship emerged on our set of dependent variables, Wilks' lambda = .70, $F(5, 271) = 22.81$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .30$. The univariate analyses of variance indicated that racial slurs used between friends were perceived as significantly less offensive, $F(1, 275) = 26.12$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$; descriptive, $F(1, 275) = 18.27$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$; and negatively expressive, $F(1, 275) = 95.30$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .26$; and as more positively expressive, $F(1, 275) = 89.46$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .25$. Racial slurs used between strangers were also perceived as more expressive (and less descriptive) than racial slurs used between friends, $F(1, 275) = 27.22$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$. These results support our hypotheses, and replicate the results of Studies 1 and 2, that racial slurs used in different situations produce differing perceptions of their expressive and descriptive natures.

A significant main effect of slur emerged on our set of dependent variables, Wilks' lambda = .33, $F(20, 900) = 18.16$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .25$. The univariate analyses of variance showed that the racial slur significantly predicted scores on each of our dependent variables: perceived offensiveness, $F(4, 275) = 124.63$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .64$; descriptiveness, $F(4, 275) = 36.41$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .35$; negative expressiveness, $F(4, 275) = 57.26$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .45$; positive expressiveness, $F(4, 275) = 58.11$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .46$; and descriptive to expressive, $F(4, 275) = 20.59$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .23$. Thus, we further examined the pair-wise comparisons to probe the extent to which these slurs differed in the extent to which participants perceived their use

as offensive, descriptive, negatively expressive, positively expressive, and as expressive versus descriptive.

The pair-wise comparisons showed no significant differences between the slurs "nigger," "negro," and "porch monkey" on any of our dependent variables ($p > .05$), except that "negro" was perceived as significantly less negatively expressive than "porch monkey" ($p = .007$). However, "homie" and "brother" were perceived as significantly less offensive, descriptive, and negatively expressive than each of the other three racial slurs ($ps < .001$). Additionally, "homie" and "brother" were perceived as significantly more positively expressive, and significantly more descriptive (and less expressive) than "nigger," "negro," and "porch monkey" ($ps < .001$). These results are consistent with our hypotheses, and the results of Studies 1 and 2, that racial slurs differ in perceptions of their expressive and descriptive natures.

The additional slurs used in the current study also produced a Slur x Relationship interaction, Wilks' lambda = .72, $F(20, 900) = 4.67$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$. Univariate analyses showed significant Slur x Relationship interactions for the negative expressiveness, $F(4, 275) = 10.63$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$; positive expressiveness, $F(4, 275) = 3.80$, $p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$; and more descriptive versus more expressive, $F(4, 275) = 12.05$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$; dependent measures. However, there were no significant Relationship x Slur interactions found for the racial slur's perceived offensiveness, $F(4, 275) < 1$; and descriptiveness, $F(4, 275) = 1.14$, $p = .34$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$.

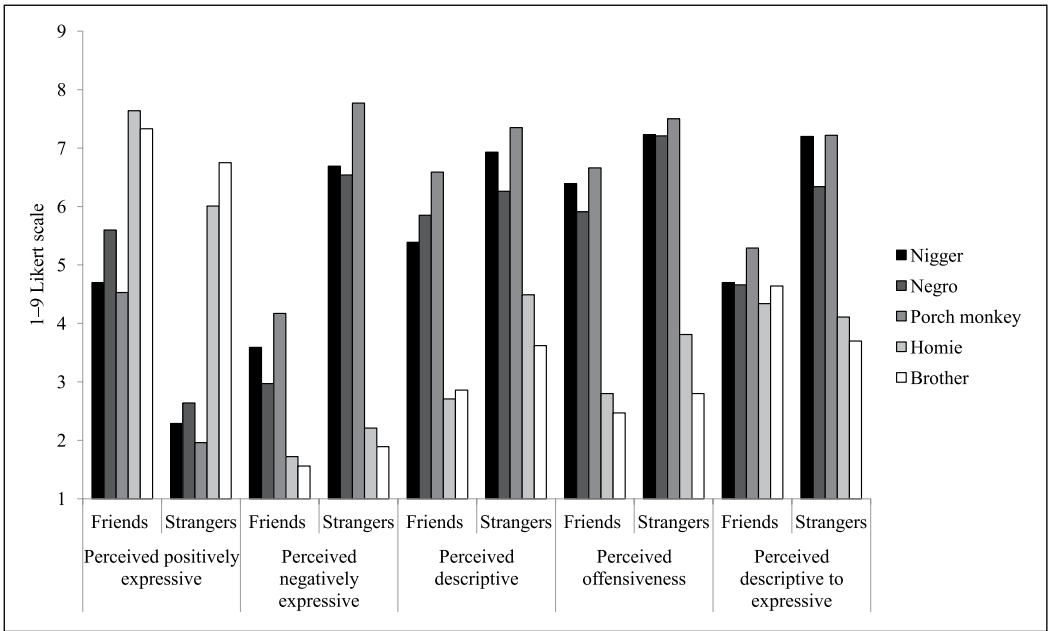


Figure 3. Perceptions of racial slurs (Study 3).

Simple effects showed no effect of relationship on the negative expressiveness of “homie,” $F(1, 275) < 1$; and “brother,” $F(1, 275) < 1$. However there were significant effects of relationship on the negative expressive nature of “nigger,” $F(1, 275) = 37.15, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .12$; “negro,” $F(1, 275) = 53.09, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .16$; and “porch monkey,” $F(1, 275) = 49.30, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$, such that each of these slurs used between strangers was perceived as more negatively expressive than when used between friends. Similarly, our results showed no effect of relationship on the positive expressiveness of “brother,” $F(1, 275) = 1.40, p = .24$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. However there was a significant effect of relationship on the positive expressiveness of “homie,” $F(1, 275) = 11.54, p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$; “nigger,” $F(1, 275) = 25.31, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$; “negro,” $F(1, 275) = 40.86, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$; and “porch monkey,” $F(1, 275) = 28.03, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$; such that each of these racial slurs was perceived as less positively expressive when used between strangers than friends. There was no effect of

relationship on our measure of descriptive to expressive nature of “homie,” $F(1, 275) < 1$. However, there was a significant effect of relationship on the descriptive to expressive nature of “brother,” $F(1, 275) = 4.66, p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$; “nigger,” $F(1, 275) = 34.82, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .11$; “negro,” $F(1, 275) = 16.82, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$; and “porch monkey,” $F(1, 275) = 20.37, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$; such that these racial slurs were perceived as significantly more expressive (and less descriptive) when used between strangers than friends, except for the term “brother” which was perceived as significantly less expressive (and more descriptive).

To test the hypothesis that perceptions of racial slurs as expressive versus descriptive would be related to the extent to which individuals perceived the racial slurs as offensive, we examined the bivariate correlations for each of our dependent variables (see Table 3). Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, our results showed the perceived offensiveness of the racial slurs was positively correlated with the extent to which individuals perceived the use of racial slurs as descriptive and

negatively expressive, as well as more expressive and less descriptive. Additionally, the perceived offensiveness of the racial slurs was significantly negatively correlated with the extent to which participants perceived the use of racial slurs as positively expressive.

The current study provides additional support for each of our hypotheses in a new situation which involved contact between a White and Black individual outside of a competitive situation. First, this study demonstrated that different racial slurs used between friends versus strangers produced differing levels of perceived expressive and descriptive natures of the racial slurs. Second, this study demonstrated that the extent to which individuals perceived racial slurs as more descriptive versus more expressive was related to their perceptions of the slurs as offensive.

General Discussion

Our current studies further the debate about whether slurs are descriptive, expressive, or both. It has been argued that slurs have lost their descriptive nature, and therefore operate in solely expressive manners, in essence serving as explicatives (Hedger, 2012, 2013). However, others have argued that slurs may also be used as descriptors to describe targets' ethnicity, requiring a compromise between the purely expressive and purely descriptive perspectives (Blakemore, 2014; Croom, 2011, 2014; Jeshion, 2013). Additional research by O'Dea et al. (2015) suggests that different slurs in different situations result in differing levels of their perceived offensiveness. A key point that has not been researched previously was what leads different racial slurs in different situations to be perceived as descriptive versus expressive, and this was the inspiration for our current studies that examined third-party observers' perceptions of different racial slurs in different situations as expressive and descriptive. We also examined whether the distinction of racial slurs as descriptive and expressive was related to the extent to which participants perceived the racial slurs as offensive. Replicating previous literature on racial slurs (e.g., O'Dea et al., 2015), our results

suggest that not all slurs are equal in offensive intensity (e.g., "nigger" is perceived to be more offensive than "nigga"), and that slurs used between strangers are perceived to be more offensive than slurs used between friends. Extending beyond the previous literature, the results of our three studies provide substantial support that different slurs and slurs being used between friends (vs. strangers) result in slurs being perceived differently in terms of their relative expressive versus descriptive natures. Specifically, as the perceived offensiveness of slur increased, racial slurs were perceived to be more expressive and descriptive. Further, when deciding whether slurs were comparatively more descriptive versus more expressive, greater levels of perceived offensiveness were related to higher levels of perceived expressive versus descriptive natures of the slur.

The current research is not without limitations. These online studies employed vignettes. Individuals may have responded differently if actually placed into the situations and may have perceived the use of racial slurs differently. Thus, these results may not generalize beyond a controlled research setting. Therefore, future research should test these effects in real-world settings in which racial slurs are used by majority group members to target minority group members. Future research should also examine the temporal order of the evaluations of racial slurs as offensive, descriptive, and expressive to examine, for example, whether the extent to which individuals perceived the racial slurs as more expressive results in individuals perceiving the racial slurs as more offensive, or if the extent to which individuals perceive the racial slurs as offensive results in individuals perceiving the racial slurs as more expressive.

Further, when examining whether slurs are used as expressive versus descriptive, the most direct way to make this distinction is to examine the intent of the perpetrator. However, due to ethical concerns associated with asking individuals to use racial slurs to target Black individuals, we are not able to examine perpetrator intent. Therefore, we used a vignette in which a third

party is asked to make inferences about the intent of the perpetrator to examine, instead, the perceived linguistic function of different racial slurs used between friends versus strangers.

The current studies do have many strengths, extending the discussion of the expressive and descriptive capacities of racial slurs by directly examining factors that lead individuals to perceive racial slurs as expressive versus descriptive. Croom (2011, 2014) speculated that racial slurs function to both describe and express emotion toward targets. By showing different racial slurs and different relationships between individuals affect both the extent to which participants perceived the use of racial slurs as expressive and descriptive, we are able to support the hypothesis that racial slurs function to both describe and express emotion toward targets. Additionally, by changing the vignette in Study 3 as well as the racial slurs used by a White individual toward a Black individual, we replicated our findings and showed that they generalize to both competitive and noncompetitive situations.

The current studies may inspire future research. Interestingly, the term "nigger" was not perceived to be significantly more offensive than "negro" or "porch monkey." In fact, upon examination of the means on the measures, "porch monkey" was actually perceived to be slightly, but nonsignificantly, more offensive than "nigger." This effect should be examined in future research due to previous assertions in the literature that "nigger" is the most offensive term in the English language (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Croom, 2011; Jeshion, 2013; Kennedy, 2002; Vallée, 2014). The results of our current studies provide preliminary evidence that this may not be the case. Admittedly, this is speculation based on the findings of one study, but we are curious to examine why this may be. Research on slur reappropriation suggests outgroup members reclaim racial slurs to use among themselves as a means of affiliation (Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2011; Galinsky et al., 2013; Rahman, 2012). This research suggests that (as may be the case with racial humor; e.g., Rappoport, 2005; Saucier, O'Dea, & Strain, 2016) social groups may use

racial slurs to serve a defensive purpose (as a "shield"; Rappoport, 2005), consequently reducing the slurs' offensive impact (as a "sword"; Rappoport, 2005). The terms "nigger" and "nigga" are commonly reappropriated. However, "negro" and "porch monkey" are less commonly reappropriated. Therefore, we speculate this reappropriation may not only work as a means of affiliation, but may actually lower the offensive capacity of the term "nigger." This effect could have practical implications and should be examined in future research.

Additional research should further examine perceptions of racial slurs that are, as Hedger (2012, 2013) states in his papers, inaccurate or untrue (e.g., Black racial slurs used to target Whites). Hedger uses the necessary truth aspect of racial slurs as a foundation for his argument that racial slurs are purely expressive. We have currently begun examining perceptions of racial slurs that are untrue as expressive versus descriptive (e.g., Blacks using Black racial slurs to target Whites; O'Dea & Saucier, 2016). We found Black racial slurs used to target Whites were perceived as more affiliative and less derogatory than White racial slurs used by Blacks to target Whites. However, future research should further examine how individuals perceive racial slurs that are not historically used descriptively toward a group to examine how this lack of descriptive potential affects perceptions of the slurs' offensive, expressive, and descriptive natures.

Conclusion

The functions and uses of racial slurs have been debated. Our current studies have extended this debate by examining whether different racial slurs and relationships between perpetrators and targets of racial slurs result in differing perceptions of the slurs as descriptive, expressive, and offensive. Our findings increase the understanding of, and the implications associated with, the use of racial slurs. Some argue racial slurs have evolved to the extent that they no longer describe their targets. Therefore, we examined factors influencing the perceptions of different

racial slurs in different situations as more descriptive, expressive, and offensive. The justification–suppression model of prejudice asserts that when suppression factors are weaker (e.g., racial slurs are perceived as less offensive), individuals will feel more justified in expressing prejudice. Our findings extend previous research by showing different racial slurs used between friends versus strangers lead to varying levels of perceived descriptive versus expressive natures of the slurs. Additionally, our findings suggest the extent to which third-party observers perceive racial slurs to be expressive versus descriptive is related to perceptions of their offensiveness. This suggests the perceived linguistic functions of racial slurs may be inextricably rooted in the perceived capacities of the slurs to offend.

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