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Laura Leets; Howard Giles; Kimberly Noels

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Attributing Harm to Racist Speech

Laura Leets

Department of Communication, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-2050, USA

Howard Giles

Department of Communication, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-4020, USA

Kimberly Noels

Department of Psychology, Arts Building, 9 Campus Drive, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada S7N 5A5

This study extends previous research to examine the perceptions of harm resulting from racist speech. Using moderately intense messages, it explores these perceptions between Asian American and Caucasian ethnic groups. There is some evidence to suggest that the ethnic-group membership of the speaker will affect the perception of harm. We also note a theoretically based methodological concern regarding the manipulation of message explicitness.

The propensity towards narrow identity, ingroup and outgroup distinctions and intolerance have been fundamental topics for social research (Tyler & Smith, 1998; Worchel *et al.*, 1998). A recent development in this domain has been to focus on racial defamation (e.g. Leets & Giles, 1999; Whillock & Slayden, 1995), as such speech is one mechanism that groups can use to differentiate themselves. The purpose of the present investigation is to replicate and extend the Leets and Giles (1997) study on the perceived harm of racist slurs.

Leets and Giles (1997) conducted a three-part empirical study in which participants evaluated reality-based epithets a Caucasian sent to an Asian American. Specifically, they examined how group membership (Caucasian and Asian American) and message explicitness (direct and indirect) influenced the attribution of harm. Results revealed that outgroup members (Caucasians) assessed direct messages of racism to be more harmful than did ingroup members (Asian Americans), but, conversely, ingroup members evaluated the indirect messages of racism to be more harmful than did the outgroup members.

As Leets and Giles (1997) note, there are at least three possible frameworks that — alone or in some combination — can explain outgroup members' higher perception of harm: (a) the black sheep hypothesis (Marques & Paez, 1994), (b) the complexity-extremity hypothesis (Linville & Jones, 1980) and (c) the expectation-violation model (Burgoon & Miller, 1985). The black sheep hypothesis stems from the social identity literature (e.g. Tajfel, 1982) and proposes that people engage in ingroup bias towards socially desirable group members and derogation towards socially undesirable ones. In other words, this is a strategy to 'save face' when one's positive social identity is threatened by an embarrassing group member. The Caucasian students' perception of greater harm may be a way to disapprove of the improper behaviour of an ingroup member. Alterna-

tively, the complexity–extremity hypothesis would suggest that ethnic-group members have more experience with racism and likely possess a more complex and differentiated schema. On the basis of the complexity of their experience, they tend to make more moderate judgments. Finally, the third model proposes that, when expectations are violated, they result in either more (positive violation) or less (negative violation) favourable attributions. Perhaps racist speech is considered a negative violation for Caucasian students and more standard for minority students.

This study extends the previous one in two ways. First, the racist message between a Caucasian and an Asian American was less intense (i.e. not ‘severe and extreme’ and thus not a legally actionable harm) and hence more commonly experienced. Deprecating speech varies by degrees of emotional intensity and explicitness (Kim, 1994). While our expressions ‘your sort’ and ‘damn chinks/honkeys’ would not constitute dehumanising ethnic labels, people still desire respectful treatment. We argue that various levels of deprecating speech, especially those commonly experienced, are just as deserving of investigation as are harmful expressions with a legal remedy.

Second, the perceived harm of the same racist message is examined across the two ethnic groups (i.e. both groups are depicted as senders as well as recipients of the message). When racism is studied from a structural perspective (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 1996), racial slurs aimed at the subordinate group are of main interest because members lack the ability to institute or impose their views on others. However, this study adopts a social psychological perspective and views racism as a set of ideas or beliefs. Both dominant and subordinate groups can exhibit racism and, as described by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), can have a tendency to perceive one’s group as superior to and possessing greater social status than the other group. Ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination serve to maintain or enhance a person’s self-esteem. Hurling epithets is commonly understood as a universal trait of intergroup relations (Allen, 1990), and it is possible to find epithets that disparage even the dominant group. Our goal is to investigate how evaluations of racism will vary across the groups.

Based on the Leets and Giles (1997) study, we propose that when respondents attribute harm resulting from a racist message (Caucasian to Asian American), group membership and message explicitness will interact in such a way that the outgroup members (Caucasians) will evaluate direct messages as more harmful than indirect ones, and ingroup members (Asian Americans) will make opposite attributions. For the reverse, when an Asian American utters a racist message to a Caucasian, we explore how group membership and message explicitness influence the perception of harm.

Two hundred and one undergraduate students (73 males and 128 females) volunteered to participate during several courses at an American university. Based on their self-reported ethnic identity, 51% were Caucasian and 49% were Asian American. Tension has surfaced recently between these two groups and reports of anti-Asian telephone calls, graffiti, and e-mail have gained attention in the state’s press (e.g. Lubman, 1998). The anti-Asian sentiment is arguably related to that group’s disproportionately large presence in the state’s most competitive higher-education system.

A 2 x 4 between-subjects analysis of variance tested the hypothesis and research question. The dependent variable was the harm attributed to the recipient of a racist message. The two independent variables were: (a) the participants' ethnic group membership (Caucasian vs. Asian American); and (b) four versions of a racist epithet, varied by the speaker's ethnicity (Caucasian and Asian American) and message explicitness (direct and indirect). Given the exploratory nature of the study, this particular factorial design permits a comparison of all four versions of the racist message regardless of the success of the manipulations.

Each respondent read one vignette that described an encounter between a Caucasian and an Asian American male in a crowded shopping mall, resulting in a moderately intense epithet. The stimulus scenario was modified to produce four parallel versions (see Appendix A) that differed according to the speaker and message explicitness. The explicitness of the racial utterances was determined in light of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. That is, a direct message had one possible interpretation and an indirect message had multiple interpretations. The speaker for an indirect statement could deny one meaning in favour of another, whereas in a direct message the speaker's meaning was undeniable and explicit. In the context of our vignette, words such as 'honkey' and 'chink' had one clear meaning, while the phrase 'your sort' potentially had multiple meanings. Although the vignette is created purposefully for this study and is not based on an actual encounter, it is plausible and one the participants could readily imagine. In addition, the word count was consistent across all conditions (54 words), eliminating passage-length confounds.

The measure of intensity for both the direct and indirect racist utterances was guided by Mosher and Proenza's (1968) schema of verbal aggression. Severe cases are defined by word choices under the labels of 'severe derogation with cursing' and/or 'threat of attack', whereas the less severe cases are defined by word choices from so-called 'criticism', and/or 'stereotypic derogation' categories. The direct racist utterances used in this study were stereotypic ('chinks'/'honkey') and selected on the basis of their recognition as such by both groups. Although 'honkey' is usually an epithet African-Americans (and perhaps black people elsewhere) direct towards Caucasians, comparable terms that Asian Americans direct towards Caucasians (e.g. *Hakujin*, *Haole*) were (from a pilot study) unfamiliar, incomprehensible and problematic when Caucasian students assessed them. Even though 'honkey' may sound outdated to some, it is one of the more recognised pejoratives aimed at Caucasians, along with 'whitey' and 'cracker' (e.g. Blauner, 1994; Kane, 1998). Given that the term 'honkey' is viewed as a kind of culturally generic epithet against Caucasians, we adopted it (not without reservations) for our purposes here. The epithets used in this study appear in the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (10th edition) and are defined as epithets. Even though racist statements can differ profoundly in the extent to which they evoke reactions in recipients — for numerous reasons (Alford & O'Donnell, 1983; Leets & Giles, 1999) — 'chink' and 'honkey' were selected for their relative equivalency. In addition, the indirect racist statement ('your sort') was a 'criticism' that may or may not have been viewed as a group-based reference. According to this scheme, both the direct and indirect utterances were moderately intense, with respondents perceiving the direct messages as racist ($M = 6$ on a seven-point scale).

The study used an abbreviated form of the Leets and Giles (1997) questionnaire (25 closed-ended items) in an attempt to replicate earlier findings. The dependent variable resulted from a summation across a composite of 17 items (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.86) that included 14 words (downhearted, depressed, withdrawn, worthless, inadequate, insecure, inferior, sad, humiliated, insulted, tense, anger, rattled and uneasy) frequently used in the mental health literature to examine psychological distress, and three items that examined general harm to the target individual, to the ethnic group and to society. Four questions served as manipulation checks for message explicitness (direct/indirect; explicit/implicit; multiple/one interpretation[s]; ambiguous/clear).

In order to determine whether participants perceived the messages according to our manipulations, we conducted *t*-tests to examine separately the racial utterances delivered by the *Caucasian* and the *Asian American*. The direct and indirect racial messages spoken by the *Caucasian* were successfully manipulated. The statements varied significantly according to clarity ($t[102] = 2.49, p < 0.01$), directness ($t[102] = 2.08, p < 0.04$), and explicitness ($t[98] = 4.34, p < 0.001$). The direct message was more clear ($M = 5.82$), direct ($M = 5.95$) and explicit ($M = 6.27$). The indirect statement was more ambiguous ($M = 4.86$), indirect ($M = 5.16$) and implicit ($M = 4.78$). However, the *Asian American's* direct and indirect racial comments were not differentiated. That is, the comments did not vary by clarity ($t[94] = 1.52, n.s.$), directness ($t[92] = 0.87, n.s.$) and explicitness ($t[94] = 0.22, n.s.$). Both comments were perceived as clear ($M = 5.0$), explicit ($M = 5.0$), and direct ($M = 5.4$). Apparently, the indirect racial utterance aimed at *Caucasians* was not perceived as such. Consequently, we proceeded with caution, careful to note that this indirect message was actually a direct one — an outcome we found theoretically significant in and of itself.

As noted above, the study examined the influence of ethnic-group membership, message explicitness, and message source on perceived harm. The analysis of variance revealed one main effect for message version ($F[3, 133] = 11.10, \eta^2 = 0.20, p < 0.001$), no main effect for the raters' ethnic-group membership, and no interaction effect. The four versions of the racist message varied by message explicitness and source. A contrast analysis revealed that respondents perceived the direct racist messages, regardless of the sender's ethnicity, as more harmful than the indirect messages ($t[92] = 2.30, p < 0.02$). However, given that the *Asian American's* indirect message was actually viewed as a *direct* one, it is interesting to note that participants found an *Asian American's* direct message just as harmful as a *Caucasian's* indirect message. It appears there is some evidence to suggest that the ethnic-group membership of the speaker will affect the perception of harm. Hence, this finding supports the Rodin *et al.* (1990) assertion that derogation towards empowered groups is perceived as less harmful than that aimed at less empowered groups.

This study partially replicated the Leets and Giles' (1997) finding that *Caucasians* viewed direct racist messages as more harmful than indirect ones, and that *Asian Americans* had opposite perceptions. The first part was confirmed; however, there was no support for the second.

In other respects, the indirect statements reassume compelling social significance when examined in an intergroup context. Recall we used the same direct and indirect racial utterances across both ethnic groups. When an *Asian Amer-*

ican expressed the claim 'your sort', both ethnic groups saw it as direct and explicit, whereas the same words expressed by a Caucasian to an Asian American were viewed as indirect and implicit. In other words, message source mitigated the perception of message explicitness. More ambiguity surrounded 'your sort' when a Caucasian stated it, perhaps because minority-group members tend to demonstrate a high degree of tolerance, trying all possible alternative interpretations before construing an incident as racist (Essed, 1988; Louw-Potgieter, 1989). Moreover, modern race theories (i.e. Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986) have noted that Caucasians, the majority group, are reluctant to appear racist. Many Asian American and Caucasian respondents were willing to give the Caucasian speaker the benefit of the doubt, albeit for different reasons (that can be tapped in future research), and were not automatically interpreting the statement as an attack against Asian Americans. However, when an Asian American made the claim 'your sort', it was seen by both ethnic groups as a direct and explicit attack towards Caucasians. Respondents may have evaluated it in terms of broken cultural expectations for Asian Americans. The Asian American communicated with the Caucasian directly and forthrightly rather than in the more subtle, tactful way of Asian cultures, perhaps sending a very clear message. Americans with a Far Eastern heritage are still socialised and expected to maintain harmony and avoid conflict (see Ting-Toomey, 1988), at least more than their American counterparts with a Western heritage.

With respect to the stimulus material, intergroup researchers face difficulties in neatly distinguishing between interpersonal and intergroup situations, as the definition depends upon the perceptions of participants or evaluators (Brewer, 1979; Harrington & Miller, 1993). An interpersonal interaction is characterised by participants' perceptions of each other as individuals and not as members of socially derived categories; an intergroup one reflects the reverse. The problem with the absence or presence of social representations is that everyone has multiple group memberships that can vary according to salience, even within a situation. If the current study had focused solely on direct or explicit racist messages, this distinction would not be problematic, as ethnic identity would be salient in the encounter. However, the perceptions of the context here were closely linked with message explicitness. With regard to the direct racist message ('damn chinks'/'honkeys') the epithet helped establish an intergroup context; with the indirect racist comment, the message ('your sort') was more problematic. If the referent of 'your sort' were the group, then the message would be construed as racist, but if it were the kind of individual, it would not. While creative techniques for manipulating message explicitness are needed, we would not recommend unnecessarily complicating the matter by combining it with salience of identity. Ideally, the salience of the self-concept should remain on an intergroup level and future research should pursue other avenues for successfully achieving these manipulations.

Derogatory epithets — such as racist speech — are a phenomenon about which much still needs to be learned in terms of determinants and consequences. Empirical effort in this area has potential for important application, since deprecating speech is the most commonly reported hate crime (Nardi & Bolton, 1991) and can contribute to ethnic unrest, discrimination and acts of violence. This study is one step in our systematic effort to investigate how harmful speech func-

tions in a range of intergroup settings — not only interethnic ones, but also those involving ageism, sexism, anti-Semitism, etc.

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Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Dr Laura Leets, Department of Communication, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-2050, USA (leets@leland.stanford.edu).

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Appendix A: Stimulus Material

Direct messages

Caucasian to Asian American: At a crowded shopping mall, Li, an Asian American, is walking around with some friends. While looking at a display in a window, Li accidentally bumps into John, a Caucasian. After Li apologises, John exclaims loud enough for others to hear, 'Yeah right, you damn chinks always live in a world of your own!'

Asian American to Caucasian: At a crowded shopping mall, John, a Caucasian, is walking around with some friends. While looking at a display in a window, John accidentally bumps into Li, an Asian American. After John apologises, Li exclaims loud enough for others to hear, 'Yeah right, you damn honkeys always live in a world of your own!'

Indirect messages

Caucasian to Asian American: At a crowded shopping mall, Li, an Asian American, is walking around with some friends. While looking at a display in a window, Li accidentally bumps into John, a Caucasian. After Li apologises, John exclaims loud enough for others to hear, 'Yeah right, your sort always live in a world of your own!'

Asian American to Caucasian: At a crowded shopping mall, John, a Caucasian, is walking around with some friends. While looking at a display in a window, John accidentally bumps into Li, an Asian American. After John apologises, Li exclaims loud enough for others to hear, 'Yeah right, your sort always live in a world of your own!'