Experiencing Hate Speech: Perceptions and Responses to Anti-Semitism and Antigay Speech

Laura Leets*
Stanford University

This study examines how people experience hate speech. Specifically, it assesses people’s perceptions regarding both the antecedents and outcomes of such expression targeted at Jews and homosexuals. One hundred twenty university students read (and in some cases also supplied) real-life epithets aimed at their social identity and then provided an assessment of their (a) perceived short- and long-term consequences, (b) understanding of the motive behind the message, (c) response to the sender, and (d) response to the message in terms of soliciting social support. A content analysis of the accounts produced the following patterns: (a) short- and long-term consequences mirrored a three-stage sequence found within other traumatic experiences; (b) respondents described motives as enduring, not situational, states; (c) the most common response strategies were passive; and (d) participants often sought support. The discussion focuses on implications for interventions that may mitigate negative consequences of hate speech.

The general question guiding this article is the examination of how it feels to be a target of hate speech. People’s perceptions of the underlying motives for hurling epithets, their resulting consequences, and how recipients choose to respond can have important personal (e.g., Kinney & Cloven, 1995) and societal implications (e.g., Leets & Bowers, 1999; Margalit, 1996). It is an issue that has not received much empirical investigation (e.g., Graumann, 1998) in the growing body of multidisciplinary literature focused on hate speech (e.g., Leets & Giles, 1999). Yet, the field of victimology (Viano, 1992) has extensively focused on the effects of a multitude of traumatic events (Frieze, Hymer, & Greenberg, 1987). Thus, the present study transfers these systematic findings to the domain of hate speech,

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Laura Leets, Communication Department, McClatchy Hall, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-2050 [e-mail: leets@stanford.edu]. I wish to thank Peggy Bowers for her feedback on various drafts of this article as well as Missy Krasner, Reese Marshall, and Mitch Mayne, who helped with data collection and analysis.
underscoring the link between these two areas of investigation. Arguably, hate speech can be considered traumatic (less virulent, of course, than other acts of crime or violence) in that recipients may find the experience overwhelming, thereby exhausting normal resources available for coping with life’s various stresses. In addition, this article further extends previous work by examining perceptions of the underlying motives of speakers of hate slurs and response strategies to their actions.

According to Leets and Giles (1999), harmful speech is broadly defined as utterances that are intended to cause damage, and/or irrespective of intent, that their receivers perceive to result in damage. They are careful to note that such speech may result in several different types of injuries on multiple levels (personal, group, and societal). This study will focus on one type of harmful speech, hate speech, a term commonly used in the legal community (see Nielsen, this issue; Levin, this issue) to address speech that denigrates persons on the basis of their race or ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, physical condition, disability, sexual orientation, and so forth (Sedler, 1992). This study examines the perceived psychological or emotional harm individuals experience in an intergroup context. Communication can take place on either an intergroup or an interpersonal level, depending on the salience of social or personal identity, respectively. However, the domain of this study is strictly an intergroup one, and the study is framed within the Harmful Speech Model (Leets & Giles, 1999). The study of intergroup dynamics (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1987) has established that mere categorization of people into groups can lead to favoritism toward the ingroup and discrimination against the outgroup in order to maintain a positive social identity. This perspective has been broadly applied (e.g., Hogg & Abrams, 1988) and recently has been adopted as a theoretical basis for understanding and integrating work concerned with harmful speech (Leets & Giles, 1997, 1999). Arguably, the same categorizational and motivational processes are operating regardless of the group membership. In this article, I examine perceptions across two different group identities (religious and sexual orientation), exploring patterns that may be indicative of all the intergroup domains and those that appear sui generis.

Specifically, I elected to study hate epithets addressed to Jews (anti-Semitism) and homosexuals (antigay). Scholars (e.g., Grosser & Halperin, 1983; Kaufman & Raphael, 1996) have documented that these groups have been targets of consistent and vehement hostility. Although the foundation of a Jewish identity is debated in terms of its having a religious or an ethnic base, historically the persecution has been religiously anchored. Thus, I chose to view anti-Semitic slurs as attacks on a religious identity. Of course, the prejudices these groups experience vary in terms of their ubiquity, duration, and persistence and in the grievousness of their consequences. My intent is not to rank the intensity of hatred expressed toward outgroups or to establish a hierarchy of suffering. Rather, the two groups have been both a historical and contemporary target of societal condemnation and therefore
serve as a point of departure for examining the perceived antecedents and outcomes of hate speech.

Although Jews are recognized as an outgroup and at times treated as such, anti-Semitism has decreased appreciably in the United States since World War II, to historic lows. Jews prosper and play a prominent part in every area of American society with virtually no institutional discrimination (Wisse, 1991). This can be seen even by the acceptance of the term “Judeo-Christian” (Lipset & Raab, 1995). However, this has not ended Jewish perceptions of the exclusion of Jews. Because anti-Jewish barriers have been dismantled for less than a generation (Alexander & Seidler-Feller, 1992), Jews continue to hold a historically understandable anticipatory defense mechanism. Lipset and Raab (1995) also note that the radical drop in anti-Semitic responses may reflect changes only in respondents’ willingness to express negative attitudes and that latent anti-Semitism could activate under the right circumstances, especially among people who are currently indifferent. Moreover, there is a resurgence of anti-Semitism in quarters of the African American community (e.g., Nation of Islam; cf. Monroe, 1994). Regardless of these small elements of anti-Jewish activism, American Jews’ civil status is basically protected.

Unlike Jews, homosexuals often are not recognized as a legitimate minority group deserving of constitutional protection against discrimination. In addition, mainstream culture perceives homosexuality as psychologically and/or morally deficient. The AIDS epidemic further aggravated existing antigay sentiment. Despite the widespread aversion toward homosexuals, national surveys during the past 2 decades reveal a growing willingness to grant basic civil rights to gay people (Herek, 1996). Yet individually many heterosexuals continue to condemn homosexuality morally and to reject or feel uncomfortable with gay people. In comparison to other minorities (e.g., Jews), homosexuals run a higher risk of experiencing more negative events such as loss of employment or custody of children, antigay violence, or more chronic daily hassles (DiPlacido, 1998). Many homosexuals manage their stigma by receiving emotional affirmation of their identity from the gay community (Berger, 1992). Here they can redefine themselves as members of an oppressed minority group rather than as deviant. Regardless of support, cohesiveness, or severity of persecution against these two groups, models from various areas of study provide insight into the dynamics encompassing hate speech.

The area of victimology focuses on research (e.g., Davis, Lurigio, & Skogan, 1997; Doerner & Lab, 1995; Viano, 1992) and intervention (e.g., Salter, 1995) among populations who are vulnerable and/or in crisis. Victims of trauma, regardless of degree, appear to experience stress reactions similarly (Frieze et al., 1987). Of course, this emphatically does not mean that people experience different traumatic events (e.g., rape, death, physical abuse, stigmatization) with the same degree of intensity, but merely that the same elements are present. Most would
agree that hate speech is ugly and regrettable, but not all understand how it is injurious, let alone traumatic (Lederer & Delgado, 1995).

One such potentially injurious outcome of this speech is that it strips people of their dignity. According to Harcum (1994) “the word dignity comes from the Latin dignus, meaning to have intrinsic worth or excellence or to be esteemed by others. . . . Dignity is the totality of those qualities that make a person valuable, esteemed or useful to someone else” (p. 101). Although moral philosophers make precise distinctions among dignity, self-respect (Margalit, 1996), self-worth (Quinton, 1997), and recognition (Taylor, 1992), such a fine gradation is not necessary here. What is important is that people can experience hate speech as mistreatment by another person, which can elicit anxiety and distress. As Graumann (1998) points out, “aggression itself is largely performed or enacted in words . . . everyday conflicts between competing and rivaling individuals . . . are, at least in their early stages, carried out verbally” (p. 45). Moreover, other scholars have argued persuasively that words (van Dijk, 1987) and pornographic pictures (MacKinnon, 1993) may hurt people in deep and permanent ways. Along these lines, people have reported that psychological or emotional pain can be a worse experience to bear than physical pain or material loss (Leets & Giles, 1997). Given that hate speech can hurt and/or undermine human dignity, it seems reasonable that the consequences of such slurs may follow the same structural pattern as other traumatic events. This study intends to explore that possibility and cautiously notes that while one person may be traumatized as a result of hate utterances (one-time vs. repetitive), the same words may have no influence on another person and may even strengthen his or her tolerance and restraint.

There are various types of coping models (Viano, 1992). One useful and acclaimed framework among victimology specialists is Bard and Sangrey’s (1986) three-phase Crisis Reaction Model. It describes traumatic events as stages, examining reactions over time as well as summarizing the commonality of responses. It has been applied to multiple traumatic situations (Frieze et al., 1987) and also guided the American Psychological Association’s Task Force on Victims of Crime and Violence (1985). According to this model, consequences of traumatic events usually fall within three domains—feelings (affect), thoughts (cognition), and actions (behavior)—and can be traced according to a predictable three-stage sequence: (a) impact-disorganization, (b) recoil, and (c) reorganization. In the impact-disorganization phase immediately following the traumatizing event, recipients display emotional reactions that can include anger, denial, disbelief, and a feeling of violation or vulnerability. This stage can last from hours to days. In the next stage, recoil, other short-term emotional reactions emerge. Specifically, the individual experiences emotional swings (e.g., fear to anger) or conflicting reactions (self-blame to other-blame). Loss of identity, self-respect, and trust are also common. The long-term reorganization phase involves attempts at coping and behavioral changes. That is, the individual is able to resolve the trauma of the event
in this last stage by establishing more effective defensive-vigilant behaviors and revising values and attitudes to readjust to everyday life. Employing the Crisis Reaction Model in the context of hate speech, I define short-term effects by the emotional consequences of the first two stages, impact/disorganization and recoil, whereas long-term effects I distinguish by the attitudinal and behavioral changes demonstrated in the third stage, reorganization.

Accordingly, and on the premise that hate speech will follow a similar structural pattern to other traumatic events, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The perceived short-term effects of anti-Semitic and antigay slurs will be more emotional and less attitudinal or behavioral, whereas the estimated long-term effects of anti-Semitic and antigay messages will be more attitudinal or behavioral and less emotional.

Besides tracking the consequences of hate speech, I also want to ascertain people’s own understanding regarding its occurrence. What potential motives are attributed to the expression of hate epithets? Moreover, how do people respond to the communicator of the message (response strategies) as well as manage their own response to the episode (coping strategies)? Specifically, in this study I limited my focus to whether social support was solicited, and if so, from whom. Each of these three elements (consequences, responses, and coping strategies) and their interrelationships is depicted in the Harmful Speech Model, the details of which have been presented elsewhere (see Leets & Giles, 1999).

First, because motives attributed to speakers of hate speech naturally vary according to the situation, I want to investigate not just the motives people attribute to slurs, but also how perceived motives are associated with short-term effects and response strategies. That is, hate speech may be experienced differently as a result of the attributed intent behind the speech. Moreover, the perceived motive will probably influence how a recipient chooses to respond to the sender. In order to explore these interrelationships, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: What motives are attributed to the expression of hate speech? Moreover, how are motives attributed to the expression of hate speech associated with short-term effects? Response strategies?

Second, I want to examine the response strategies adopted toward a person who has made a hate utterance. Assertiveness may now be a cultural bias (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Both popular literature and academic literature (Garner, 1980) have been touting assertive communication as effective communication. It is plausible that an assertive response is not always the most effective response and certainly may not be the most appropriate and satisfying response for the receiver. Yet it appears that assertiveness is a common response and arguably may be further activated in an intergroup context. In terms of the two groups studied herein, Jews have a more secure place in society than homosexuals. Even though many gay youth have pride in their identity and are more confrontational than prior
generations of gay people (DiPlacido, 1998), increased assertiveness on their part may have a more perilous effect (e.g., antigay violence) than for their Jewish counterparts. Consequently, another hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Jews will report more assertive response strategies than homosexuals.

Third, a great deal of research suggests that social support and certain personality characteristics moderate the effects of stress. Often processing a hurtful event involves talking with others in order to express emotions, to seek information, and to be recognized as victims (Burleson, Albrecht, & Sarason, 1994). In order to fend off the negative consequences of stigmatization, it is natural for minority-group members to embed themselves in supportive networks. Most likely, the different social histories associated with Jews and homosexuals will have an impact on their stigma management. For example, it is not uncommon for Jewish youth to be prepared from an early age to expect hostility, to learn how to process it, and to rely on family for support (Dor-Shav, 1990; Stein, 1994). Ostensibly, Jews as a group are better equipped than homosexuals to deal with prejudice and discrimination. The above discussion precipitates a third hypothesis:

H3: Homosexuals will solicit support from others when they are confronted with hate speech more than Jews.

I address the three hypotheses and the research question through a content analysis of people's responses to actual statements leveled against their group identity as well as personal examples in cases when respondents provided them. All participants read one of three possible slurs directed at their group identity and were supposed to respond as if they had been the target of the message. The answers represented their projections of how they would experience hate speech. The accounts were then coded and analyzed.

**Method**

**Respondents**

The 120 participants consisted of 71 Jews (42 males and 29 females) and 49 homosexuals (28 males and 21 females) who volunteered from one public and one private university. The students were recruited from undergraduate courses (e.g., Jewish Studies) and organizations (e.g., Hillel, Gay and Lesbian Association). The Jewish respondents ranged in age from 18 to 54 with a median age of 21, and the homosexuals ranged in age from 22 to 30 with a median age of 28.

**Analysis**

All three hypotheses and research question were examined by statistical tests designed for nonindependent categorical data. Cochran's (1950) Q statistic
tested repeated-measures data that indicated the occurrence or nonoccurrence of an event. McNemar’s procedure (Marascuilo & McSweeney, 1977) is appropriate for two-category data, as is the Stuart-Maxwell statistic (Fleiss & Everitt, 1971) for three or more categories. Phi coefficient analyses explored the research question.

**Stimulus Material**

All hate speech examples were based on actual situations (see Table 1) in order to increase external validity. The three factual anti-Semitic statements were obtained from records provided by the Center for the Applied Study of Prejudice and Ethnoviolence, whereas the three homosexual slurs were provided by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. The identity of all speakers was withheld from participants, and the messages were presented anonymously. Given that the examples were based on official reports of hate speech, no pretests were conducted to ensure they were perceived as such. The comments were accepted at face value. In addition, subjects had the opportunity to provide their own experiences of hate speech. All participants responded to one of the three examples, and approximately one third of the Jewish (N = 33) and one third of the homosexual (N = 32) respondents also included a personal account of hate speech.

### Table 1. Stimulus Material

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-Semitism</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, March 1994 (N = 25)</td>
<td>To the “white Jews” in the audience, I say: It’s gonna be a rough ride, buddy . . . . Buckle your seat belts . . . because I didn’t come to pin the tail on the donkey, I came to pin the tail on the honkey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Participant-generated example (N = 33)</td>
<td>You’re Jewish! Show me your horns, kosher boy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antigay Speech</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hate letter to Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 1995 (N = 18)</td>
<td>Homosexuality is biologically incorrect and morally wrong! Homosexuality is a threat to our environment and a threat to our innocent children! Damn you sick fucking bastards and bitches. Damn you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hate letter to Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 1995 (N = 14)</td>
<td>It’s time for you and your kind (devil’s spawn) to run back into the closet and slam the door behind you!!! We’re waiting . . . start running.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hate letter to Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 1995 (N = 17)</td>
<td>To hell with you and your way of life you butt screwers and pussy lickers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Participant-generated example (N = 32)</td>
<td>“Queer!” “Fag!” “You fucking faggot!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The intent was to examine people’s responses to speech they perceived as harmful, regardless of the message intensity. In one experiment Leets and Giles (1997) varied the intensity of racist speech based on Mosher and Proenza’s (1968) schema of verbal aggression. Severe cases of racist speech included word choices consisting of “severe derogation with cursing” and/or “threat of attack,” whereas the mild cases included word choices from “criticism” and/or “stereotypic derogation” categories. Interestingly, target group members of the racial slur did not perceive a difference in harm as a result of message intensity (severe vs. mild). Consequently, both levels of intensity were included in the present study. Although message intensity may still influence people’s responses, a number of other underexamined variables also bore investigation, and thus message intensity is a topic left for future studies.

Questionnaire

All the questionnaire booklets included basic demographic information and six short, open-ended items. The questions examined

1. the speaker’s perceived motive (“Why do you think the above comment was made?”)
2. participant’s estimated short-term consequences (“If you had been the recipient of the comment above do you think you might have experienced any short-term consequences? If so, please explain.”)
3. participant’s estimated long-term consequences (“If you had been the recipient of the comment above do you think you might have experienced any long-term consequences? If so, please explain.”)
4. participant’s estimated response strategy (“How might you have responded in this situation, if you had received the comment? Please include the strategy most likely to describe your response and what factor(s) determine(s) your response?”)
5. participant’s likelihood of seeking support (“Would you seek the support of friends, family, others [e.g., counseling, police, etc.] to come to terms with the incident? If so, please explain.”).

The last question was optional and asked respondents to provide their own experience of hate speech (“Can you recall an incident when you were the recipient of upsetting comments based on your sexual orientation/religion? Please write down the comment(s) and briefly give the context.”) If they provided an example, they were again asked to offer an assessment of the speaker’s motive, their own short- and long-term consequences, response, and support strategies.
Coding

The coding scheme was based on classifications outlined in the Harmful Speech Model (which also incorporates the Crisis Reaction Model). Examples of the coded answers for all categories except social support can be found in Table 2.

Short- and long-term consequences. Although the categorical definitions used to specify the short- and long-term consequences were discussed previously (Bard & Sangrey, 1986), they still need further elaboration. Because the repercussions of hate speech were accessed through written responses, participants defined emotions subjectively. These states were identified in terms of common terminology (angry, sad, etc.) and their contemporary use in society. An attitude consisted of subjects’ beliefs and thoughts (opinion statements). Behavior technically referred to respondents’ behavioral intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and what action(s) they claimed they would pursue. To this end, four categories were coded for short- and long-term consequences: emotion, attitude, behavior, and no consequence.

Motives. In this study motives are defined as inferences about the intentions of another person’s communication behavior, and the eight options listed in the Harmful Speech Model were coded: (a) coercion (an attempt to influence the receiver’s behavior), (b) power and dominance (gaining an upper hand to preserve or enhance status), (c) impression management (promoting self-image), (d) repressed hostility (projection of unresolved conflict and in an extreme form, psychopathology), (e) social learning (displaying patterns learned from others), (f) argumentative skill deficiency (inability to defend position), (g) emotional agitation (impulsive utterance caused by arousal), and (h) ignorance (various “-isms,” such as racism).

Response strategies to speaker. Four categories were taken from the Harmful Speech Model and used to classify response strategies: passive/withdrawal, assertive, constructive activity, and aggressive. These options were based on a very limited literature, and most likely other strategies will be derived in future research. For now a passive approach refers to silence or nonresponse, which may represent either strength or low self-worth. An assertive reply is one that is direct yet appropriate in expressing the person’s thoughts and feelings. Constructive activity refers to a retort that turns the hate comment into a joke. Finally, an aggressive response is one that is retaliatory and intended to harm the speaker.

Social support. The presence or absence of seeking social support was noted, and if support was sought, the source was categorized as well.
### Table 2. Examples of Perceived Short- and Long-Term Consequences, Motives, and Response Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated Short-Term Consequence</th>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotion</strong></td>
<td>“Such comments shock, daze, sicken and anger me, putting me in a bad mood for a few days.”</td>
<td>“I would have cussed the idiot out, making him/her look like a complete stupid, uneducated fool and kicked his/her ass.”</td>
<td>“No I think you can only be affected by speech when it concerns something you have an insecurity about; once you feel secure nobody can hurt you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I’d feel isolated, alone, resentful and embarrassed for being addressed this way for being who I am.”</td>
<td>“I would look down upon the speaker.”</td>
<td>“I would ignore it and dismiss it as stupidity.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attributed Motives</strong></td>
<td>Ignorance</td>
<td>Repressed hostility</td>
<td>Coercion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I think the speaker made the comments because s/he is a bigot/prejudice.”</td>
<td>“The person had a bad experience with the group in the past which led to hatred towards the entire culture.”</td>
<td>“I believe hatred expressed this way is based on ignorance.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I believe hatred expressed this way is based on ignorance.”</td>
<td>“The person had a bad experience with the group in the past which led to hatred towards the entire culture.”</td>
<td>“The speaker is insecure and threatened by the group.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The speaker is trying to intimidate.”</td>
<td>“The person wanted to make him/herself feel better, by making the other group inferior and giving his/her group the upper hand.”</td>
<td>“The speaker is insecure and threatened by the group.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The person had a bad experience with the group in the past which led to hatred towards the entire culture.”</td>
<td>“The person wanted to make him/herself feel better, by making the other group inferior and giving his/her group the upper hand.”</td>
<td>“The speaker is insecure and threatened by the group.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The speaker is trying to intimidate.”</td>
<td>“The person wanted to make him/herself feel better, by making the other group inferior and giving his/her group the upper hand.”</td>
<td>“The speaker is insecure and threatened by the group.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The person had a bad experience with the group in the past which led to hatred towards the entire culture.”</td>
<td>“The person wanted to make him/herself feel better, by making the other group inferior and giving his/her group the upper hand.”</td>
<td>“The speaker is insecure and threatened by the group.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The speaker is trying to intimidate.”</td>
<td>“The person wanted to make him/herself feel better, by making the other group inferior and giving his/her group the upper hand.”</td>
<td>“The speaker is insecure and threatened by the group.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Au: should say “prejudiced”
Coding Reliabilities

Five coders (four females and one male) received training on the use of the coding form. They each independently read and coded the open-ended responses. Intercoder reliability was satisfactory for all three categories and ranged from a low of .86 for simple agreement to a high of .94. Correcting for chance agreement with Scott’s pi (Scott, 1955) did not lower these values below .84.

Procedure

The questionnaires were conveniently administered to students. The study was presented as an investigation concerned with individuals’ perceptions and responses to relational messages and required approximately 15 min to complete. In each case, the questionnaires were distributed to the participants, who belonged to one of the two groups of concern (Jews and homosexuals). Upon completion, respondents received debriefing and thanks for their participation.

Results

A summary of the results for the three hypotheses and research question appears in Table 3. Two relevant points should be noted. First, 120 people participated in the study, with 65 people providing an additional self-generated example. Hence, the number of hate expressions totaled 185. Second, the data were also analyzed for gender effects and none were found. It is worth mentioning, however, that one marginally significant effect implied that gender may be related to response strategy.

H1: Respondents’ Estimated Short- and Long-Term Consequences

The first hypothesis received support. A Stuart-Maxwell analysis indicated that the short- and long-term consequences (estimated by respondents as if they had been the target of the hate message) were significantly different from each other, $\chi^2(3, N = ?) = 97.17, p < .001$. The short-term effects were more emotional (69%) than attitudinal (1%) or behavioral (5%), and the long-term consequences were more attitudinal (43%) and behavioral (12%) than emotional (0%). It is also interesting to note that no effect was a common response for both short- and long-term assessments.

RQ1: Perceived Motives and Their Interrelationships Among Attributed Short-Term Effects and Response Strategies

Overall, a Cochran’s $Q$ statistic revealed a significant difference among the attributions of motives underlying hate speech, $Q(6, N = 185) = 249.50, p < .001$. 

Au: Please provide N, which APA requires for chi-square tests.
Table 3. Distribution of Short- and Long-Term Consequences, Motives, Response and Support Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Anti-Semitism</th>
<th>Anti-Gay</th>
<th>Grand Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-Term Consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-Term Consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignorance (“isms”)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repressed hostility</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coercion</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power and dominance</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional agitation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social learning</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argumentative skill deficiency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impression management</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive/withdrawal</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive activity</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor/Rabbi</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police/Authorities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For the provided messages, respondents answered the questions pertaining to the short- and long-term consequences, response and support strategies as if they had been the recipient of the message.

Ignorance (37%) and repressed hostility (35%) were the two most common attributions, whereas argumentative skill deficiency and impression management were absent (see Table 3). Varying with the specific situations, four other motives were sometimes identified (≈7%): social learning (e.g., learning history), power and dominance (e.g., reducing the receiver’s status), emotional agitation (e.g., having a bad day) and coercion (e.g., forceful influence on receiver).

Phi coefficients were used to examine the interrelationships among perceived motives, short-term effects, and response strategies for each of the four messages per group. Beginning with the first anti-Semitic slur, if the message resulted from social learning ($r_\phi = .42, p < .05$) or if the person was perceived as ignorant ($r_\phi = .44, p < .05$), Jews tended to be passive. Relatedly, there were no
short-term effects associated with an anti-Semitic message resulting from social learning ($r_\phi = .41, p < .05$). With the second message, motives of emotional agitation ($r_\phi = .51, p < .01$) and ignorance ($r_\phi = .58, p < .01$) were linked to adopting a passive response strategy. An ignorance motive was also linked to a behavioral short-term effect ($r_\phi = .40, p < .05$). If the short-term effect was behavioral, the person was more likely to engage in an aggressive approach ($r_\phi = .52, p < .01$). The third message revealed only one significant association: A short-term behavioral effect was connected to an aggressive response strategy ($r_\phi = .46, p < .01$).

In terms of self-generated messages, a passive response was associated with ignorance ($r_\phi = .35, p < .05$).

Turning to antigay speech, phi coefficients again revealed associations among motives, short-term effects, and response strategies. In the first message the motives of repressed hostility ($r_\phi = .44, p < .05$) and emotional agitation ($r_\phi = .44, p < .05$) were associated with a passive response strategy. Similarly, the second message was also responded to passively if the person was perceived to be ignorant ($r_\phi = .52, p < .05$). With the third and self-generated messages, ignorance ($r_\phi = .57, p < .01; r_f = .42, p < .01$) was linked to no short-term effects. Additionally, the self-generated responses indicated a tendency for gays to be more assertive ($r_\phi = .45, p < .01$) when confronted with comments attributed to ignorance.

H2: Respondents’ Estimated Response Strategies

A Stuart-Maxwell analysis indicated no significant difference across the two groups. Jews were not more assertive than gays as originally predicted. A Cochran’s $Q$ analysis demonstrated that the general pattern of response strategies was significantly different, $Q(2, N = 185) = 73.90, p < .001$. As can be seen in Table 3, the respondents are somewhat split between responding assertively (41%) or passively (51%) to hate speech. Interestingly, targets favored passive, not assertive, response strategies to hate speech. Given that respondents can interpret a passive response as either a strong or weak position, the coders noted how the strategy was described. Overall, 83% of the passive responses were viewed as a strong stance, whereas 14% of the participants viewed it as a weak position. To a lesser extent, some reported aggressive strategies (7%), and none considered redirecting attention (i.e., constructive activity).

H3: Respondents’ Solicitation of Support

A McNemar test revealed a significant difference between the groups, $\chi^2(1, N = 185) = 31.25, p < .001$, confirming Hypothesis 3. The Jewish respondents were divided relatively evenly on whether they would (55%) or would not (45%) pursue support, whereas the majority (84%) of homosexual respondents indicated
that they would seek support. Those who were favorably inclined to seek social support most often sought family (57%) and friends (33%) and not authority figures (e.g., counselor/rabbi or police; see Herek et al., this issue). Overall, more people (67%) than not (33%) pursued some avenue of aid.

Discussion

The objective of this study has been to gain a more complete picture of how hate speech is received. Using the Harmful Speech Model (Leets & Giles, 1999) as a guide, I examined the perceptions associated with the reception of anti-Semitism and antigay speech. Of course, not all people will experience any particular message as harmful. Like all communication, responses are mediated by past experiences, psychological and physical strength, status, needs, goals, and so forth (Haiman, 1993). Some people are more resilient to the vicissitudes of life than others. Regardless of how the hate messages influenced the Jews and homosexuals in the study, all provided their potential short- and long-term consequences, an understanding of why such messages were expressed, and their responses to the sender, as well as their tendency to seek support.

As predicted by the first hypothesis, when short- and long-term consequences were anticipated, the patterns had striking commonality with other types of crises (e.g., rape, burglary, domestic violence, assault, robbery). Emotional consequences were the most frequently reported short-term effect, corresponding to the impact-disorganization and recoil stages of Bard and Sangrey’s (1986) Crisis Reaction Model. The long-term consequences were for the most part also in accordance with Bard and Sangrey’s (1986) three-stage model, showing that attitudinal change for hate utterances was a common response, coinciding with the reorganization phase. However, the perception of no long-term outcome was also frequently reported, which is not surprising, as an encounter with hate speech is reasonably less traumatizing than many other potential crises. The third most attributed effect was behavioral change, which again fits within the larger three-stage process as an element of the reorganization phase. In general, the overall short- and long-term effects suggest that the consequences of hate speech might be similar in form (but sometimes not in intensity) to the effects experienced by recipients of other kinds of traumatic experiences. Hurling hate slurs in an effort to harm a person’s identity does not appear to be similar to slinging arrows at the concentric circles of a target, as some would imagine. That is, there does not seem to be a center point for the maximal damage, with the degree of hurt varying with distance to that point. Instead, there seems to be a narrow mark that delineates damage, with all the slurs outside it having no effect.

Overall, participants attributed hate comments to two primary motives, ignorance and repressed hostility. Ideally, the intent of the research question was to find out why the respondents thought the person was prejudiced and to take the
Experiencing Hate Speech

analysis a step further. However, the explanation that the speaker of a hate slur is either ignorant or has repressed hostility is revealing in itself. These explanations are often thought to stem from a lack of knowledge and a response to difference, two symptoms education is thought to remedy. In other words, the tenets of the Human Relations Movement are alive and well. This movement proposed that (a) the fundamental problem of intergroup conflict stems from individual prejudice, (b) prejudice is an educational and psychological problem, basically a reflection of ignorance, and (c) the most effective solution is education (Klineberg, 1958).

Even though people still believe that higher levels of education produce tolerance, research has shown education does not always result in tolerance (Vogt, 1997). For example, Le Poire (1994) found that people who were not tolerant of those with AIDS were not persuaded to become more tolerant simply through education concerning risk factors of their own likelihood for contraction. Because of their underlying value structures, which were not strongly influenced by education, these individuals remained intolerant of people with AIDS and of gays. In other words, prejudice is not solely a result of ignorance. As Katz (1960) observed decades ago, prejudices can serve several functions (i.e., adjustment, knowledge, value, ego defense). Programs to change prejudice often fail because the multiple functions are not recognized. As the current responses illustrate, the enduring belief that education can foster the virtue of tolerance frequently becomes inflated.

Further in keeping with the intergroup theoretical underpinning of the Harmful Speech Model, respondents’ top motives described the negative behavior of an outgroup member as dispositional and not situational. That is, they saw the event not as an isolated incident, but rather as symptomatic of a broad pattern of behavior. This is consistent with the linguistic intergroup bias (e.g., Maass & Arcuri, 1996), which claims that the negative action of an outgroup member is generally described in more abstract and dispositional terms (i.e., enduring and stable), whereas the ingroup member’s negative behavior tends to be described in ways that reflect a situational attribution (i.e., context-specific and unstable). In contrast, positive behavior of an ingroup member is more likely to be described in terms of abstract, dispositional qualities in comparison to the same behavior performed by an outgroup member. Essentially this bias illustrates that language use can constitute a subtle way of maintaining and transmitting positive ingroup and negative outgroup perceptions, as predicted by social identity theory. Linguistic intergroup bias holds relevance for intergroup behavior in that it may maintain and perpetuate stereotypes, ingroup favoritism, and prejudicial attitudes (Maass & Arcuri, 1996).

The research question also examined the links among motives, short-term effects, and response strategies using a nonparametric measure of association. Some preliminary findings emerged. Across the hate messages, the top three attributed motives (e.g., ignorance, repressed hostility, social learning) were associated with
a passive response. Moreover, in several cases, the perceived motive of ignorance was linked to no short-term effect. However, with one Jewish slur, ignorance was related to a behavioral short-term effect that in turn was linked to an aggressive response strategy. The particular message (“bagel-eating, hook-nose . . .”) was a more personal pejorative and apparently put some people on the defensive, who then responded in kind to the speaker. Although no claims can be made conclusively about these interrelationships, they are heuristic and encourage a more powerful and refined investigation in the future. Communication accommodation theory (e.g., Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987) may usefully inform such efforts, helping to differentiate when people choose to adjust or diverge their speech acts and styles.

Counter to the second hypothesis, Jews were not more likely to be assertive than gays. In fact, passive strategies were the most commonly adopted response toward a person who had made a hate comment. However, assertive strategies were a common response as well. Even though assertiveness may be a cultural bias (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), those who are targets of slurs most frequently preferred not to respond to the speaker. A passive response can be interpreted as either an empowered or weak position. For example, some people viewed their silence from a position of strength—“I wouldn’t say anything back so as not to provoke this person any further. S/he obviously isn’t worth the time of day” or “I would just ignore it as silence is often more powerful than hurling back insults at anyone”—and others from a position of weakness: “I think that I would just walk away. I would feel bad but I’m not going to confront the person.” In this study, the majority of participants (83%) viewed silence (i.e., a passive approach) as taking the higher moral ground. For example, Jews were most likely to be assertive when the statement held erroneous information (example 1) and most likely to withdraw when it was obviously a mean-spirited statement with no substance (examples 2 and 3).

Results supported the third hypothesis. Homosexuals were more likely as a group to seek support than Jews. They were also more consistent in acknowledging an immediate emotional response than the Jews. The historical and/or socialization differences between the two groups do appear to mediate the effects of hate speech. In particular, Jews were less likely (55%) than gays (84%) to pursue people in their social network when the expressions upset them. Jews may be more desensitized. Indeed, as a group they have survived centuries of persecution through their tenacity, resilience, and strong community structures, despite the prejudice and disapproval of major social institutions (Grosser & Halperin, 1983). In contrast, homosexuals do not have the same history or preestablished family and community support network. In fact, their experience frequently entails social isolation, especially for adolescents (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). Overall, the majority of the participants were likely to solicit support, usually from family and friends.

As noted from the outset, some events are more apt than others to produce trauma. Rape and criminal assaults are far more likely to result in distress than
hate speech. However, this study has shown that targets of epithets can follow the same predictable three-stage pattern found in other traumatic events. It appears to be a question of how the event is appraised and understood. Once the distress has occurred, how should it be redressed? Effectively battling hate speech has been problematic. The courts in the United States have chosen to protect defamatory slurs, favoring free speech over potential negative consequences (Smolla, 1993). However, other Western liberal democracies (e.g., Canada, Western Europe, Australia) have favored legislation (cf. Henkin, 1995). Regardless of the preferred approach, the occurrence of hate speech cannot be entirely eliminated. For times when there are consequences, alternative remedies to litigation are needed for successful intervention. A central goal for future research should include the identification of strategies that could effectively mitigate negative personal and societal effects.

Along these lines, the current study may offer some initial suggestions for an individual level of analysis. For example, Murphy (1988) suggests that social support that is developed and maintained over time and exists prior to traumatic stress may protect individuals from the negative effects of trauma. In this study, some of the differences between the Jewish and homosexual groups arguably stemmed from a previctimization adaptation level. Moreover, how people overcome negative effects may also depend on the coping strategies used. Folkman and Lazarus (1985) have distinguished between two general types of coping. The first, problem-focused coping, is directed at doing something to alter the source of stress (e.g., seek social support, problem solving, positive reappraisal, confrontive coping). The second, emotion-focused coping, is directed at managing emotional distress (distancing, escape/avoidance, accept responsibility). Folkman and Lazarus argue that most stressors elicit both types of coping but the problem-focused predominates when people feel something constructive can be done, whereas emotion-focused coping tends to predominate when people feel that the stressor is something to endure. Given that epithets are often considered the rough edges of society that people are asked to tolerate in a free society, emotion-focused strategies might be more appropriate in this context. Regardless, future research can further investigate what coping skills and responses help or hinder the recovery process.

Another area that requires more attention is communicative restorative efforts by both the comforter and the comforted. A large literature devoted to this domain has demonstrated that stress and support are viewed as complex interacting processes about which little is understood (e.g., Burleson et al., 1994). In some situations talking is appropriate and needed, whereas others are characterized by greater respect for privacy (Dunkel-Schetter, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1987). Nevertheless, self-disclosure (both writing and talking) about experiences has been shown to mediate the effects of stress on physical and mental health. For instance, Esterling, Antoni, Fletcher, Margulies, and Schneiderman (1994) conducted an experiment in which undergraduates with the Epstein-Barr virus were required to
express their feelings about life events. They found that verbalizing a disturbing event resulted in improved cellular immune control over the latent virus. In addition, research has shown that emotional expression may facilitate cognitive changes such as reappraisal of an event, which may subsequently lead to adaptive behavior (Pennebaker, 1997). Coping also involves finding a quality comforter, because not all attempts at support are effective (Burleson, 1994). Ideally, quality seems to imply a comforter who can express love, care, and respect as well as the ability to validate feelings and give feedback about the appropriateness of one’s fears, beliefs, and opinions.

On a macro level of analysis, the restorative justice paradigm (Bazemore, 1998) may offer a particularly effective blueprint for managing the dignity harm incurred as a result of hate speech. This emerging movement shifts the current justice system’s offender-focused intervention to a more balanced emphasis on the needs of offenders, victims, and the community. One of the most basic themes in restorative justice is the need to “seek change in each of the three clients [offenders, victims, community], [by focusing] on healing, repair, reintegration, safety and a sense of community” (Bazemore, 1998, p. 777). Especially in societies like the United States, where it is unlikely that legal sanction will be imposed against hate speech, restorative justice intervention programs may be a way to repair the harm and rebuild damaged relationships. Future work will need to determine how best to repair the harm of hate speech, but it seems reasonable that strategies may take the form of apologies, expressed remorse, and even restitution (where appropriate). Although it may be extreme to enforce sensitivity on others with a legal remedy, there are ways to reaffirm targets of hate speech by conveying that their community views them as important and values their involvement.

Inevitably this study, like all investigations, has weaknesses. One of the more salient limitations is that the data represented self-reported responses. When participants are asked to respond to a message as though they were the target, it is possible that they may provide stereotypical or socially desirable answers that have no relation to actual behavior. Moreover, a group identification measure may be worth incorporating in future research. University students have often been found to be assimilated members of their respective groups (e.g., Ethier & Deaux, 1994). Thus the results may underestimate what might have been found if a nonstudent population had been surveyed. With respect to generalizability, the results are limited to university students, so future studies should broaden the sample as well as conduct a replication with other social identities. On the other hand, the use of multiple stimulus messages and self-generated messages across two target groups strengthens the overall validity of the findings.

In sum, this content analysis of people’s perceptions provides a further examination of the effect of, as well as the response to, hate speech. The purpose
Experiencing Hate Speech

of this study was to increase our understanding of how people experience hate utterances. The intersection between communication and victimology research was productive toward this end. It is hoped that the current study can serve as a base for further theory-driven and practical problem solving in an area that pervades a number of issues of paramount importance to society.

References


Experiencing Hate Speech


LAURA LEETS received her PhD from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1995. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Communication and an affiliate faculty member of the Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity Program at Stanford University. Her general research interests include language, prejudice, social justice, and intergroup communication. Her recent articles have appeared in such journals as *Communication Law and Policy, Communication Monographs, Communication Research, Human Communication Research, Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, and *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*.