Explaining Perceptions of Racist Speech

This two-part investigation evaluated four different explanations potentially governing theory on deprecating speech: social identity, expectancy violation, complexity-extremity, and desensitization. To test the descriptive and predictive usefulness of the first three theories, 614 participants made attributions of the perceived harm of actual racist slurs targeted at African, Asian, or Hispanic Americans. The results pointed to social identity as the most powerful theoretical construct to explain perceptions of racist speech. Although social identity concerns predicted participants’ responses better than the two competing explanations, a second study further examined the complexity-extremity and desensitization theories. A sample of 36 Asian Americans demonstrated that previous exposure (low vs. high) mediated participants’ perceptions of harm and levels of desensitization. Intergroup perceptions of racist speech seemingly derive from both social identity processes and previous experience. The study concludes with a discussion of the legal implications for hate speech.

This investigation considers why Whites and ethnic minorities perceive differently the harm of racist speech. On the surface, the fact that European Americans’ perceptions of racist speech has diverged significantly from that of African, Asian, and Hispanic Americans is so intuitive as to seem superfluous. Yet interestingly, past research has consistently found that it is the European Americans rather than the ethnic minorities who have viewed explicit racist epithets as more harmful to the target. Hence, the focus of this investigation was narrowed to direct racist utterances and to exploring intergroup perceptions of racism from both majority group members (historically the perpetrators of prejudice) and minority group members (historically the targets of prejudice).2

Racism’s importance as a social issue is evidenced by the voluminous research on discrimination (e.g., Pettigrew & Taylor, 1992), prejudice (e.g., Eberhardt & Fiske, 1998), marginality (e.g., Shapiro, 1998; Tyler & Smith,
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1998), and stereotyping (e.g., Macrae, Stangor, & Hewstone, 1996), to name a few of the concepts scholars use to elucidate this practice. The goal of this article is to contribute to our understanding of basic processes governing perceptions of racist speech harm. Currently, the ideological underpinnings are founded on social identity theory, which may not be the most accurate depiction. This study compares social identity theory to three alternative theories and empirically points to the explanation that promotes the best descriptive and predictive basis. The article begins with a review of previous empirical studies and then discusses four theoretical approaches before laying out the research questions and hypothesis. Finally, the article discusses the results of a two-part investigation.

Perceptions of Racist Speech Harm

The robust, counterintuitive finding that European Americans perceive direct racist slurs as more harmful to the recipient than do the actual targeted ethnic minority group members emerged in three previous studies examining the perceived harm of racist statements. In the first study, Leets and Giles (1997) examined the perceived harmfulness of racist speech in a legal context. In the United States, one possible avenue to pursue legal action against hate speech is the tort of intentional infliction of emotional distress. To receive a cause of action, the plaintiff must illustrate (a) intent, (b) extreme and outrageous behavior, (c) causation, and (d) severe emotional distress. How people perceived the harm of racist speech is directly applicable to severe emotional distress, that is, the consequence of the message. Leets and Giles conducted a three-part empirical study in which European American and Asian American participants evaluated reality-based epithets a European American sent to an Asian American. Specifically, they examined how group membership (European American and Asian American) and message explicitness (direct and indirect) influenced the attribution of harm to the ethnic minority target. Results revealed that European Americans assessed direct messages of racism to be more harmful than did Asian Americans, but conversely, Asian Americans evaluated the indirect messages of racism to be more harmful than did the European Americans. Unexpectedly, the minority group members (Asian Americans) in this study did not perceive explicit racist statements to result in severe emotional distress, whereas the European American participants found it significantly more harmful. Neither group rated the direct and indirect slurs as severe enough to suggest this legal remedy was an effective means for dealing with the effects of racist speech.
In a second study, Leets, Giles, and Noels (1999) examined racist messages exchanged between European and Asian Americans. That is, both groups were depicted as senders as well as recipients of the message (e.g., European American to Asian American, Asian American to European American). The epithets varied by the speaker’s ethnicity (European American and Asian American) and message explicitness (direct and indirect). European and Asian Americans again assessed the perceived harmfulness of racist slurs leveled against their in-group identity as well as the out-group identity. These messages were moderately intense and did not represent dehumanizing ethnic labels. Hence, the slurs would not be legally actionable by American standards. The results from the European American to Asian American epithets replicated the Leets and Giles’s (1997) finding that European Americans viewed direct racist messages as more harmful than indirect ones and that Asian Americans had opposite perceptions.

Because this adaptation strategy may be characteristic of Asian Americans, a third study (Leets, 1999) extended research on the perceived harm of indirect racist messages by adding epithets aimed at African and Hispanic Americans. Consistent with the previous two studies, both European Americans and minority participants read a vignette containing a racist message that a European American speaker expressed to an ethnic minority group member. The epithets were based on derogatory labels (i.e., nigger, wetback, nip) and modified across the ethnic groups to produce relatively parallel versions. The perceptual variation in racist speech harm across European, Asian, Hispanic, and African Americans appeared to be mediated by their cultural backgrounds and socialized patterns of interaction (Hall, 1983). Asian Americans were more sensitive to the communication context, evaluating indirect racist speech as the most problematic. In contrast, European, African, and Hispanic Americans were more reliant on the actual message, rating direct racist statements as most disturbing. Beyond that, European American respondents perceived more harm resulting from direct racist messages than did the non-White participants.

These studies suggest the question of why Whites perceived racist comments to be more disturbing to targets than did ethnic minority group members and provide an entry to understanding processes underlying perceptions of racist speech. Currently, one of the most influential theories to explain prejudice and racism is social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to Tajfel (1982), social identity is a person’s knowledge of belonging to a social group and the emotional meaning that results from that group membership. Individuals seek a positive social identity through social comparisons between their own and other groups. People try to achieve positive
distinctiveness for their own group to protect and maintain their self-esteem as group members. The understanding of social categories has direct implications for how we see each other and underlies both the inclusion and exclusion processes inherent in ethnic name-calling.

Social identity theory is founded on an interplay of the cognitive process of social categorization and the motivational process of self-esteem. Although social identity is predominantly cognitive in origin and structure, the emphasis of theorizing has been motivational. As Hogg and Abrams (1993) noted, it is difficult to picture a satisfactory explanation of prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup conflict that does not ultimately deal with motivation and emotion. The central motivational factor in social identity theory, a concern for positive self-esteem, can account for a large portion of the dynamics in intergroup relations. However, it may not be the most useful representation for racist speech. Cognitive theories also have proved advantageous for understanding intergroup relations, such as in the area of stereotyping processes (e.g., Stephan, 1985). In particular, there are three rather complementary cognitive theories that alone or in some combination also may explain the perception of racist speech harm: expectancy violation, complexity-extremity, and desensitization. Although these theories are embedded in somewhat different contexts, they all discuss cognitive processes that are to some degree mediated by past experience. This article examines the explanatory power of both motivational and cognitive constructs for understanding people's perceptions of harm resulting from racist speech. Thus, it now will examine each of these theories in turn.

Theoretical Perspectives

Within social identity theory, racial epithets represent classic out-group derogation that can occur naturally and automatically as a function of group distinctions. According to the theory, such behavior is an attempt to heighten the position of the speaker's in-group status relative to the out-group. Deprecating speech, however, represents “old-fashioned” racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998) that goes against the current cultural values of fairness, justice, and racial equality. In fact, when Whites are asked to evaluate an explicitly hostile statement uttered by an in-group member, one way they may try to protect or restore their positive social identity is through dissociation from the threatening behavior, also known as the black sheep effect (Marques & Paez, 1994). This effect represents a self-enhancing bias that distances a deviant in-group member who negatively contributes to the group's social identity. Presumably, for the black sheep effect to be a useful explanation,
European Americans must express an attempt to save face and indicate embarrassment or shame by the overt wrongdoing.

In terms of the ethnic participants, how does social identity theory explain why the minority group members perceived the racist speech as only moderately harmful? There are at least three possible answers. First, the targets of the racist speech may accept the negative self-concept and the resulting stigmatization (Crocker & Major, 1989). Yet the ethnic minority participants in the previous studies evaluated their ethnic identity as important and reported a secure understanding and acceptance of their own ethnic identity. It does not appear likely the participants were simply passive recipients of majority group prejudice. Second, they could have rejected or ignored the statement. As Crocker and Quinn (1998) explained, ethnic members’ self-esteem is not necessarily contingent on others for its maintenance and actually may be less contingent on external feedback. They argue it is important to recognize the contextual nature of self-relevant perceptions and judgments. The ethnic minority participants may be less vulnerable to prejudice and racist comments than commonly assumed. Third, as a somewhat complementary account, social identity theory outlines a number of ways (e.g., social mobility, social creativity, and social competition) stigmatized groups may enhance their social identity (Murrell, 1998). The participants may have defined their ethnic identity in such a way that in spite of a negative social evaluation from the dominant group member, they still view their group identity with value. In this case, social identity concerns will be a helpful theoretical construct if the importance of one’s ethnic heritage is associated with perceptions of racist speech harm.

Whereas social identity theory offers one viable explanation, the door remains open to other noteworthy cognitive theories. One of these is expectancy violation theory (J. Burgoon, 1978, 1995), which is based on sociological norms and beliefs for the contextual appropriateness of behavior. More specifically, this approach has been applied to a language-based theory of persuasion (M. Burgoon, 1990), and it readily can be extended to racist speech. According to expectancy violation theory, people have expectations about the behavior of others. These beliefs originate from direct experience, other people, and other beliefs (e.g., Olson, Roese, & Zanna, 1996). When these expectations are violated, they stimulate changes in arousal, which in turn affect people’s attributions and behavior. If the behavior of another is perceived to be more favorable than expected (positive violation), this would engender the receiver to evaluate the sender more positively than if the person had conformed to standard expectations. If the behavior of another person is perceived to be more negative than expected (negative violation), this will
produce a more negative assessment than if the person had met the standard expectation. Based on the data, it appears the expression of racist speech most likely would be considered a negative violation for European Americans and standard or less surprising to the ethnic minority participants, who probably have more experience with prejudice. Scholars have demonstrated that individuals exhibit more pronounced reactions to negative violations than to positive ones (Floyd & Voloudakis, 1999). For expectancy violation theory to be an effective explanation, participants who view racist speech as a negative violation must evaluate it as more harmful than participants who view it as a standard expectation.

A concept closely related to expectancies is that of schemata. The third theoretical approach, complexity-extremity theory (Linville, 1982; Linville & Jones, 1980), posits that people have a more complex and differentiated cognitive schema for their in-group but relatively simple and impoverished ones for the out-groups. It is important to distinguish between expectancies and schemata. Olson et al. (1996) noted that expectancies are derived from beliefs, and schemata are mental structures that include beliefs and information about a class of objects. Hence, one of the primary functions of schemata is to allow the generation of expectancies, but they are not expectancies themselves. In the context of racist speech, ethnic minority participants may have encountered deprecating speech more than European Americans. Thus, they have a richer background of experience and their schemata for this speech are more differentiated, whereas European Americans have arguably fewer and less varied experiences and, hence, fewer schemata. In this study, cognitive schemata are inferred by previous experience. If complexity-extremity theory is to be a useful explanation, participants with little experience must respond in a more polarized manner, assessing the harm of racist speech as high. Those participants who report a greater complexity of experience must perceive the harm from a racist message as more moderate.

The fourth theory, desensitization (Groves & Thompson, 1970; Mathews, 1971), does not differ appreciably from the complexity-extremity explanation. Desensitization is usually defined simply as a reduction in responsiveness to repeated stimulation. For example, research on media violence has shown that repeated viewing of TV violence leads to desensitization to screen violence as well as to an increased acceptance of violence in real life (Bryant & Zillmann, 1994). Likewise, repeated exposure to derogatory ethnic slurs may result in a similar blunting. For purposes of this study, desensitization is defined as information processing. The more that people become self-aware of reduced anxiety, the more they dissociate themselves from the hurt that results from that stimulus. For desensitization to be a helpful explanation,
participants with more exposure to racist speech must assess less harm than participants who have minimal experience.

The primary goal of the first study was to compare social identity theory, expectancy violation theory, and the complexity-extremity theory by assessing the capacities of these explanations to predict perceptions of racist speech harm. To this end, the following two research questions were proposed:

**Research Question 1**: When European American participants attribute harm to a racist statement made by an in-group member toward an ethnic minority (African, Asian, and Hispanic American), to what extent are positive social identity, expectations, and previous experience associated with attributions of harm?

**Research Question 2**: When ethnic (African, Asian, and Hispanic American) participants attribute harm to a racist statement a European American makes toward another member of their ethnic group, to what extent are social identity, expectations, and previous experience associated with attributions of harm?

The following evidence will test each explanation. If social identity theory is a strong predictor, both European Americans and minority participants will display self-enhancing processes to maintain or recover a positive sense of social identity, albeit for different reasons. European Americans will be threatened by a deviant in-group member who exhibits embarrassing behavior (i.e., black sheep effect), and ethnic minority members who identify with their group will be motivated to maintain a positive social identity. In both cases, the perceived racist speech harm to the target should be high. On the other hand, if expectancy violation theory is an effective predictor, participants who view racist speech as a negative violation will evaluate more harm to the target of racist speech than will people who viewed the utterance as a standard expectation. Expectancies will guide the processing of information such that a violation of normative expectancies should produce greater perceived harm. For complexity-extremity theory to be a powerful predictor, past experience will mediate perceptions of harm to a target of racist speech. The complexity or simplicity of people's cognitive schemata will determine perceived harmfulness of a racist utterance. Those participants with less experience will have a more impoverished mental structure and subsequently perceive more harm. A series of statistical analyses will explore the explanatory value of these theories.

The objective of the second study was to explore the usefulness of the complexity-extremity and desensitization explanations by examining whether repeated exposure to racist speech mediated ethnic members' per-
ceptions of harm and level of desensitization. Specifically, the study differentiated between Asian Americans who had high and low exposure to racist speech, examining only racist speech targeted at Asian Americans. This ethnic group has been used in all previous studies (Leets, 1999; Leets & Giles, 1997; Leets et al., 1999), making it appropriate for replication purposes. In addition, the sample was the largest minority group represented in the respondent pool and thus the most convenient to recruit.

According to the complexity-extremity theory, people with more experience will have more complex cognitive schemata and hence provide more moderate perceptions of harm than those with little experience. Similarly, high exposure to racial slurs may increase desensitization to such comments, diminishing any initial emotional reaction. As a result, people will perceive racist comments as less degrading or offensive. Based on previous research (Leets & Giles, 1997), the following hypothesis was proposed:

**Hypothesis 1**: Among Asian American participants, those who have high exposure to racist statements will report more moderate judgments of harm and be more desensitized than those who have low exposure to racist epithets, who will perceive the harm as more extreme and be less desensitized.

**Empirical Studies**

Similar to previous investigations in this area, the following two studies use experimental designs that request White and non-White participants to evaluate one vignette containing a racist statement that a White speaker expressed to a non-White recipient. All participants assessed the harm they believed the target of the racial slur experienced. The three main U.S. ethnic minority populations—African, Asian, and Hispanic Americans—served as targets of the racial epithet. Although all three ethnic groups have different historical experiences with prejudice, to some extent they all have shared the same forms of institutional racism. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that ethnic categories and labels are often disputed (e.g., Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Leets, 1999). Each stated ethnic classification is a general umbrella designation that includes several variant but similar populations (e.g., Anderson, 1992; Leets, Giles, & Clément, 1996). All group memberships (i.e., European American, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic American) were self-reported. The dependent variable, perceived harm, was based on previous operationalizations.
Study 1

Method

RESPONDENTS

Participants in the study were 614 students (232 males and 382 females) from 11 universities (8 public and 3 private) across the United States (the West Coast, Midwest, and South). The universities were selected by purposive sampling, that is, on the basis of the student demographics. For example, certain West Coast universities were targeted for their large Hispanic American population and southern universities for their large African American population. The entire sample ranged in age from 17 to 54, with a median age of 20. Based on their self-reported ethnic identity, 43.3% were European American, 19.2% were Asian American, 16.9% were Hispanic American, 17.4% were African American, and 3.2% reported other.

PROCEDURE

Participants completed the questionnaire during their normal class periods in communication, English, and Asian American, African American, and Chicano studies courses. Course instructors introduced the study as an investigation concerned with individuals’ perceptions and responses to relational messages. Instructors were explicitly asked not to refer to the messages as “hate speech” or “racial slurs” until they debriefed the students. The questionnaire required 10 to 15 minutes to finish.

STIMULUS MATERIAL

As can be seen in Table 1, the stimulus materials were one-paragraph vignettes that consisted of a European American speaker uttering a racist slur. The race of the speaker was constant, but the target was varied across three ethnic minority groups (African, Hispanic, and Asian American). Five racist slurs were applied to each ethnic group. Thus, there were 15 conditions (3 ethnic targets x 5 message replications). The word count across the same scenarios was relatively constant (an average of 38 words), reducing confounding effects due to passage length. Each participant read one racial slur and responded to that condition only. The racist messages are based on actual events that occurred on the campuses of Auburn University, the University of
Chicago, the University of North Carolina, and the University of Maryland. The National Institute Against Prejudice and Violence collected the incidents from newspaper reports (Pinkow, Ehrlich, & Purvis, 1989). The first situation was based on disapproval of an interracial relationship. The second scenario focused on a racial epithet expressed on public transit. The third incident occurred during a job recruitment at a prestigious law school. The fourth vignette happened after a class discussion on affirmative action. In the fifth situation, an instructor made disparaging comments to a student. The contexts demonstrated circumstances that the raters, university participants, could readily imagine. Three of the five vignettes served as replications from previous research (Leets, 1999; Leets & Giles, 1997).

**Measurement Instrument**

The questionnaire incorporated 29 closed-ended items counterbalanced on 7-point scales. The measurements were classified into three general sections.
Attribution of harm. Three questions measured respondents’ perception of harm resulting from racist speech. All items have been used in previous research (Leets, 1999; Leets & Giles, 1997; Leets et al., 1999) and were included in this study (Cronbach’s alpha = .77): “In your opinion, to what extent are these types of statements harmful for society-at-large?” “In your opinion, to what extent do you think these kinds of statements injure the status of the ethnic group to which the student is a member?” and “In your opinion, to what extent do you think the statements resulted in emotional and/or psychological harm to the student?”

Theoretical operationalizations. Given that the black sheep effect operates to preserve a positive social identity, three questions addressed whether European Americans felt their social identity was threatened (Cronbach’s alpha = .73): “To what extent does the above statement make all white people look bad?” “Is the European American’s behavior embarrassing to you?” and “To what extent does this person’s comment make you feel ashamed?”

Minority participants’ social identification with their group was operationalized in two ways. First, one item assessed the importance of ethnic identification: “How important is your ethnic group identity?” Second, ethnic group affiliation was operationalized by Phinney’s (1992) 13-item Ethnic-Identity Achievement Scale. Seven items measure a person’s understanding and commitment to his or her ethnic identity (Cronbach’s alpha = .88): “I have spent time trying to find out more about my own ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs”; “I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me”; “I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership”; “I am clear about the role my ethnicity plays in my life”; “I have spent time trying to learn more about the culture and history of my ethnic group”; “I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me, in terms of how to relate to my own group and other groups”; and “In order to learn more about my ethnic background, I have often talked to other people about my ethnic group.” Six questions address a person’s attitudes toward and interactions with out-group members (Cronbach’s alpha = .83): “I enjoy being around people from ethnic groups other than my own,” “I like meeting and getting to know people from ethnic groups other than my own,” “I sometimes feel it would be better if different ethnic groups tried to mix together,” “I often spend time with people from ethnic groups other than my own,” “I try to become friends with people from other ethnic groups,” and “I am involved in activities with people from other ethnic groups.”

To determine whether the message positively or negatively violated participants’ expectations about the racist statement, two questions were
included \((r = .55, p < .001)\): “To what extent did the message meet your expectations about social behavior?” and “Were you surprised by the comment made by the European American?” This first item was measured on a 7-point scale in which 1 represented \textit{more negative than expected}, 4 indicated \textit{as expected}, and 7 noted \textit{more positive than expected}.

The complexity-extremity theory focuses on cognitive knowledge structures that guide social evaluation. In particular, those with a complex schema tend to have greater familiarity in a social domain than those with a simple schema. In this study, schemata were operationalized by three items that examined the extent to which participants had previous experience with racist speech (Cronbach’s alpha = .84): “How frequently have you experienced deprecating speech because of your ethnicity?” “How often have people you know experienced deprecating speech based on their ethnicity?” and “Are comments of this nature a common occurrence in your general surroundings?” Other scales (e.g., Landrine & Klonoff, 1996) that assess the frequency of racism use similar straightforward questions.

\textit{Demographic items.} Standard demographic items, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, were included in the questionnaire.

\section*{ANALYSES}

For replication purposes, a 4 (ethnic group membership) \(\times\) 5 (racist message) mixed-effects ANOVA composed of a fixed factor of ethnic group membership (European American, African American, Asian American and Hispanic American) and a random factor of racist message determined whether European Americans viewed the racist speech as more harmful to the target than did the non-Whites. The dependent measure was harm incurred by the racist statement. A series of standard and hierarchical regressions and one discriminant analysis tested the research questions.

\section*{Results}

\textbf{PRELIMINARY ANALYSES}

Ethnic minority respondents viewed their ethnic identity as very important \((M = 6.39, SD = 1.12)\), whereas European American participants rated it as moderately important \((M = 4.38, SD = 1.81)\). Consistent with previous research (Leets, 1999), participants in this study displayed an appreciation for and acceptance of their ethnic identity based on the Phinney (1992) Ethnic-Identity Achievement Scale: African American \((M = 5.68, SD = .97),\)
Asian American ($M = 5.49, SD = 1.07$), and Hispanic American ($M = 5.74, SD = 1.08$). The ethnic minorities ($M = 3.85, SD = 1.65$) had moderate personal experience with racial epithets, whereas European Americans ($M = 2.13, SD = 1.39$) had little exposure, and all respondents assessed such occurrences as regular but not frequent ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.70$).

The focus of this study was on direct racist slurs, and the participants perceived the statements both as direct ($M = 6, SD = 1.51$) and as containing one clear meaning ($M = 5.68, SD = 1.67$). A mixed-effects ANOVA determined whether European Americans, in accordance with past research (Leets, 1999; Leets & Giles, 1997), perceived the racist speech to be more harmful to the target than did the non-Whites. In a surprising departure, the results of the ANOVA revealed one significant main effect for racist message, $F(4, 551) = 6.92, \eta^2 = .08, p < .01$, no significant main effect for group membership, and no significant interaction. As can be seen in Table 2, European Americans did not view the racist messages as more harmful than did the three minority groups. Rather, there was only a significant difference across racist messages (walk $M = 5.98, SD = .89$; bus $M = 6.15, SD = .81$; law $M = 5.87, SD = 1.16$; class $M = 5.74, SD = 1.06$; teacher $M = 6.23, SD = .72$). Scheffé post hoc tests indicated that the respondents viewed the teacher’s racist remarks as significantly more harmful than the class discussion and law firm recruitment scenarios ($M = 6.23, SD = .72$ vs. $M = 5.74, SD = 1.07$, and $M = 5.87, SD = 1.16$), $t(600) = 4.72, p < .05$. Characteristic of all message effects research (see Jackson, 1992), people’s assessments will be to some degree dependent on the messages chosen to represent the category of interest. Hence, using multiple racist messages does not remove this confound but does provide a way of taking it into account statistically (i.e., treating the message replication factor as random).

**RESEARCH QUESTION 1: EUROPEAN AMERICAN PARTICIPANTS’ ATTRIBUTION OF HARM**

To determine which criterion offers the most help in predicting European Americans’ perception of racist speech harm, a standard multiple regression analysis was employed by regressing perceived harm on three predictors: social identity (i.e., black sheep), past experience with hate speech, and expectancy violation. Prior to the analysis, an assessment of all the assumptions revealed only one violation. Based on Mahalanobin’s distance, eight outlier cases were removed from all further analyses. Taken together, the three variables provided significant information, $R^2 = .22, F(3, 249) = 24.04, p < .001$, with two significant predictors: social identity, $\beta = .44, t = 7.99, p < .001$, and expectancy violation, $\beta = -.11, t = -1.95, p < .05$. 688
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message</th>
<th>European American</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Asian American</th>
<th>Hispanic American</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<td>Walking</td>
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<td>Teacher</td>
<td>6.04</td>
<td>.76</td>
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Next, a hierarchical multiple regression evaluated how well social identity, expectancy violation, and past experience could predict perceptions of racist speech harm after separating out the effects of the alternate explanations. The regression used two orders in which social identity was entered first (social identity, expectancy violation, experience) and last (expectancy violation, experience, social identity). The first entry examined how well expectancy violation and past experience added to the predictive ability above and beyond what was provided by social identity. This order was influenced by a previous study (Leets & Giles, 1997) in which a small sample (N = 41) of students was asked to explain why they believed Whites perceived the harm of racist speech to be higher than the members of the targeted ethnic minorities. The most frequent explanation resembled the black sheep effect. The other two explanations, expectancy violation and complexity-extremity, were relatively equivalent but quite a bit less frequent. In the second order, social identity was evaluated for what it added to the prediction beyond expectancy violation and past experience. That is, the expectancy violation indicator was entered into the equation first, the experience variable was entered second, and the social identity item was entered third. Prior to the analysis, an assessment of all the assumptions revealed no violation.

The results (see Table 3) indicate that all three blocks of variables added significantly to the amount of variance. In particular, the black sheep explanation accounted for 21% (Order 1) and 19% (Order 2) of the variance. Given that the context was relevant for European Americans’ social identity, it appears their evaluation of harm was partly a symbolic rejection of an in-group deviant’s desire to protect a positive social identity. This result supports the explanatory value of the black sheep effect for understanding how White participants attribute harm to racist speech. Furthermore, expectancy violation and experience, when entered in the second and third step of the first model respectively, each added a small (.01) but significant increment in the explained variance. Similarly, in the second model, when expectancy violation and experience were entered in the first and second step of the model, respectively, the contribution to the explained variance was again small (.02 and .01) and significant. This suggests that these variables have little direct influence on European Americans’ perceptions of harm resulting from a racist message, after having accounted for the perceived threat to social identity as a consequence of an embarrassing in-group member. Similarly, the beta coefficients reflect this pattern, with perceptions of harm best predicted by the social identity measure (feelings of shame, a perception of social identity threat, and feelings of embarrassment) and expectancy violation making a somewhat more modest contribution.
Table 3
Summary of the Hierarchical Regression Analysis for European American Respondents on Attribution of Harm With Social Identity, Expectancy Violation, and Experience Indicators

<table>
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<th>Variable Entered</th>
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<th>B at Step</th>
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<th>β</th>
<th>B</th>
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<td>Expectancy violation</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>-.11**</td>
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<td>.02</td>
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<td>.02</td>
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<td>.27***</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.22</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
It is important to note that the respondents in this study had minimal experience with deprecating speech ($M = 2.14, SD = 1.40$). Hence, the lack of significance for experience can actually support the complexity-extremity theory. Arguably, the majority of participants viewed the racist messages as exceptional or out of the ordinary and, as predicted by the complexity-extremity theory, were more extreme in their evaluations. Also, a t test between European Americans who had little ($n = 220$) and high ($n = 23$) experience with hate speech was in the right direction but nonsignificant. Thus, the multiple regression provides direct support for the black sheep effect and suggests some evidence for the complexity-extremity theory.

Finally, a discriminant analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996) explored how well the three black sheep items differentiated between high and low perceptions of harm resulting from racist messages. For the most part, the data were consistent with the assumptions of discriminant analysis. However, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated, Box’s $M = 10.43$, approximate $F(3, 31,832) = 3.38, p < .01$, and most likely increased the probability of misclassification. With this in mind, the total sample of respondents was divided in two groups in which the discriminant function was developed on one group (analysis sample) and then tested on the other group (holdout sample). The holdout sample was purposefully defined as one third of the total sample and was used to determine the degree to which chance fluctuations affected the derivation of the discriminant functions. Specifically, attention was given to the holdout sample when results were analyzed in terms of classification accuracy.

As expected, one discriminant function separated high and low evaluations of harm. Before removing the discriminant function, significant predictable variation existed between the groups to justify extraction of the discriminant function, canonical correlation = .46, Wilks’s lambda = .78, $\chi^2(2) = 46.39, p < .000$. The discriminant function supported the black sheep effect in that European Americans who were embarrassed, ashamed, and felt the derogatory comment reflected poorly on their group identity provided higher attributions of harm.

The classification accuracy varied across the two levels of harm. Given that the sample was composed of people who for the most part evaluated the racist messages as harmful, the classification examined how accurately the black sheep factors would classify those perceiving harm, and it was well above chance (95.1%). The violated assumption of homogeneity of variance did not result in a loss of accuracy between the original and holdout classification samples. It does not appear that chance fluctuations affected the derivation of the discriminant functions. Furthermore, the ability to distinguish
between high and low perceptions of harm was above chance (85.94%), using the proportional chance criterion (chance = .72). The classification ability represented a 73% reduction in errors of prediction over what would have been expected by chance (τ = .73) and was significantly better than what would have been expected by chance alone, Press’s Q = 27.28, critical value of χ²(1) = 10.82, p < .001. Consequently, it appears that the black sheep effect delineates between low and high attributions of harm for European Americans. In this case, White people who are embarrassed, ashamed, and concerned about a negative group image as a result of an in-group deviant evaluated the event as more harmful.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: AFRICAN AMERICAN, ASIAN AMERICAN, AND HISPANIC AMERICAN PARTICIPANTS’ ATtribUTION OF HARM

For the non-White groups, social identity (i.e., ethnic identity importance, ethnic identity achievement), past experience with hate speech, and expectancy violation items were entered as predictors in a standard regression equation with perceptions of harm as the dependent variable. The purpose of this statistical test was to determine the importance of each variable by what it added to the prediction of racist speech harm independent of the other variables. Prior to conducting the analyses, all the assumptions were checked and met. The first regression was completed on African Americans, and taken together, the four variables provided significant information, \( R^2 = .12, F(4, 95) = 3.18, p < .01 \), with only one significant predictor, a social identity item, ethnic identity achievement, \( \beta = .30, t = 3.04, p < .005 \). The second regression, conducted on Asian Americans, was also significant, \( R^2 = .13, F(4, 106) = 3.87, p < .005 \), with one significant predictor, a social identity item, ethnic identity importance, \( \beta = .36, t = 3.30, p < .001 \). Following the same pattern emerging in the first two regressions, the third regression, performed on Hispanic Americans, was significant, \( R^2 = .21, F(4, 91) = 6.16, p < .001 \), with a social identity predictor, ethnic identity achievement, as significant, \( \beta = .36, t = 2.68, p < .005 \). Clearly, out of the three explanations explored, the results suggest that the attributions stemmed from social identity concerns as opposed to violated expectations or past experience.

Discussion

The impetus for investigating the processes underlying perceptions of racist speech harm stemmed from a robust, counterintuitive finding that European Americans perceived direct racist slurs as more harmful to the recipient
than did the actual targeted ethnic group members. Although the minority ethnic group members in this study diverged from past research (Leets, 1999; Leets & Giles, 1997; Leets et al., 1999) by evaluating the racist slurs to be just as harmful as did the European Americans, this investigation still serves to illuminate the cognitive processes governing people’s perceptions. In that respect, the merit of the study was not dependent on the counterintuitive result. The findings were of fundamental importance, because they confirmed that social identity concerns do indeed offer a solid descriptive and predictive ability for explaining attributions of racist speech. Moreover, the preliminary evidence suggests it is important to be cognizant of the complexity-extremity theory for one reason: The majority of the respondents had modest-to-low exposure to racist epithets. As would be expected of people with rudimentary and impoverished cognitive schemata, they estimated the harm stemming from racist speech to be extensive. People make more extreme evaluations of events that are seen as exceptional than they do of more regular events. Without experienced participants, the complexity-extremity theory could be examined only partially. It remains to be seen whether those with more experience provide more moderate judgments of harm. If the complexity-extremity explanation proves accurate, it could clearly link the present results with past findings. According to the analysis of these results, the expectancy-violation theory did not appear to provide a solid explanation, even though non-Whites were two times more likely than Whites to view racist speech as expected rather than “worse than expected.” Given the limited operationalization of expectancy-violation theory, any conclusion on the usefulness of this theory remains speculative and thus warrants more rigorous examination in future research.

Consequently, we are left with the question as to which theory, social identity or complexity-extremity, is more fundamental to understanding the perceived effects of harmful speech. Perhaps both perspectives are needed. Although the question is not fully resolved here, social identity theory is unquestionably a crucial element of attribution and found empirical endorsement as a basic principle underlying harmful speech. The results provided ample evidence supporting the black sheep effect for understanding how European Americans attribute harm to racist speech. The hierarchical regression demonstrated that following the entrance of social identity to the equation, subsequent additions of expectancy-violation and complexity-extremity variables produced only a minimal increase (1%) in prediction. Even when social identity was added last to the hierarchical regression, it contributed much more to the prediction, beyond the expectancy violation and complexity-extremity variables. Similarly, the discriminant analysis
provided a 95% classification accuracy in categorizing European American participants who perceived the racist speech as harmful. Hence, it appears that European Americans were trying to preserve a positive social identity when an undesirable in-group member threatened it. Furthermore, the three standard multiple regressions, one for each ethnic group, revealed one important predictor variable per equation: ethnic-identity achievement (African American and Hispanic American) and ethnic identity importance (Asian American). The ethnic participants who valued their ethnic group membership were likely protecting or restoring a positive sense of their social identity when confronted with racial stigmatization.

The findings in Study 1 call for a more thorough understanding of the conditions under which the two cognitive theories are important. For example, Marques and Paez (1994) argued that the complexity-extremity theory emerges only for dimensions irrelevant to social identity. If, however, the complexity-extremity works in an environment where judgments are relevant to people’s social identity such as with ethnic epithets, it may have important legal ramifications for regulating hate speech through tort law, one of the few legal remedies able to address derogatory speech in the United States. The tort law of intentional infliction of emotional distress would become particularly problematic. To successfully press charges, a plaintiff must illustrate that the speech resulted in severe emotional distress. If perceptions of harm are mediated by people’s cognitive schemata, this can lead to an underestimation for those with a complex schema or an overestimation for those with a simple schema. In other words, evaluations of harm may be subjectively distorted, negating this legal mechanism for responding to hate speech.

Study 2

Method

RESPONDENTS

The respondents were 36 Asian American university students (11 males and 25 females) recruited from a market research firm. They ranged in age from 18 to 25, with a median age of 20. Based on their self-reported ethnic identity, all were Asian American and viewed their ethnic identity as important ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.56$, on a 7-point scale). Moreover, they viewed racist speech as a moderately common occurrence ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.76$).
PROCEDURE

A market research firm with more than 50,000 people registered online recruited Asian American university students age 18 and older. Several hundred students received a recruitment message that provided the author’s Universal Resource Locator and described the research as being interested in examining racist expression. One hundred eighty students completed a presurvey that consisted of a few questions regarding their experience with racist speech and five basic demographic variables. Students who qualified for the actual study received $10 for their participation. Respondents fell into two groups according to whether they had relatively high (≥ 5) or low (≤ 2) self-reported exposure scores as measured on a 7-point Likert scale. Based on this information, 36 participants (17 high and 19 low) were recruited for the online survey. The survey Web page included an informed-consent link. After providing consent through a click-wrap agreement, further access to the survey required a password, which led to an instruction page and then the survey. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Formage scripts automatically recorded respondents’ answers and compiled them into a single data file. Collection of IP addresses ensured that people participated only once. Before the data were analyzed, all IP addresses were separated from answers to keep the results anonymous.

STIMULUS MATERIAL

One of the five racist slurs used in Study 1 was randomly selected for Study 2. Each participant evaluated the racist statement that occurred after a class discussion on affirmative action (number 3, see Table 1).

QUESTIONNAIRE

A similar version of the questionnaire used in Study 1 served as the measurement instrument. It included 28 closed-ended items counterbalanced on 7-point scales. The same three measures examined participants’ frequency of experience with racist speech (Cronbach’s alpha = .82). The overall harm was again obtained by summing across three items (Cronbach’s alpha = .80). Two new measures examined participants’ desensitization to racist speech: “To what extent are you desensitized to deprecating comments of this nature?” and “How intense is your emotional response to deprecating comments of this nature?” Three manipulation checks; Phinney’s (1992) 13-item, two-part Ethnic-Identity Achievement Scale (Cronbach’s alpha =
analyses

A series of t tests examined the hypothesis. The two groups differed by their previous exposure (low vs. high) to racist epithets. The dependent variables were the perceived harm of and desensitization to racist speech.

results

Preliminary analyses

People’s self-reported exposure to racist speech was consistent with their initial response in the presurvey (high M = 5.39, SD = 1.08 vs. low M = 1.58, SD = .51), t(34) = 12.10, d = 5.39, p < .001. Again, they viewed the racial slur as direct (M = 5.78, SD = 1.64) and as containing one clear meaning (M = 5.82, SD = 1.53). Based on Phinney’s (1992) Ethnic-Identity Achievement Scale, participants reported an appreciation for and acceptance of their ethnic identity (M = 5.13, SD = 1.16), which parallels the findings in Study 1.

Hypothesis 1: Perceived Harm of and Desensitization to Racist Speech as a Function of Previous Exposure

The statistical analyses confirmed the hypothesis. That is, participants who had more exposure to racist speech reported a higher level of desensitization (high M = 4.71, SD = 1.23 vs. low M = 3.79, SD = 1.70), t(31) = 2.54, d = .53, p < .01; reported a lower emotional response (high M = 4.28, SD = 1.02 vs. low M = 5.59, SD = 1.29), t(34) = 3.50, d = .98, p < .001; and attributed less harm (high M = 4.01, SD = .85 vs. low M = 5.83, SD = .94), t(34) = 3.09, d = 2.02, p < .001, to the epithets as compared to participants with less exposure.

discussion

The purpose of Study 2 was simply to demonstrate whether repeated exposure to racist speech mediated ethnic minority members’ perceptions of harm and levels of desensitization. The study provided initial evidence to this end. However, future research will need to assess the capacity of the complexity-extremity and desensitization theories to predict ethnic members’ attributions of harm. On the basis of this study, both explanations appear to merit continued examination.
In addition, Study 2 potentially reconciles the higher level of harm ethnic participants attributed to racist speech in Study 1, which is a surprising deviation from two previous investigations. Specifically, Leets and Giles (1997) found that Asian Americans evaluated explicit racist statements as between 4 and 4.5 on a 7-point scale. In a follow-up study, Leets (1999) extended the ethnic groups (African, Asian, and Hispanic American) and used multiple racist messages. Again, the ethnic minority participants rated the harm from 3 to 4.5 on a 7-point scale. Study 1 results were unexpected in that the ethnic minorities (African, Asian, and Hispanic American) rated several racist epithets from 5 to 6.5 on a 7-point scale. This departure does not appear to have resulted from different messages or varying degrees of ethnic group identification. A few of the same racist slurs were included in both studies, and Phinney's Ethnic-Identity Achievement Scale indicated that respondents reported a secure sense of their ethnic identity in the current investigation and in Leets's (1999) study. Rather, the results in Study 2 suggest that ethnic minority participants’ attributions of harm varied according to their previous experience with racist speech. This is somewhat speculative, however, as exposure levels were not measured in the earlier experiments (Leets, 1999; Leets & Giles, 1997).

In terms of legal application, the findings question the possibility of using the tort of intentional infliction of emotional distress to battle racist speech. To receive compensation from this cause of action, the plaintiff must illustrate four factors: (a) intent, (b) extreme and outrageous behavior, (c) causation, and (d) severe emotional distress. The most difficult element to quantify is severe emotional distress. There is no baseline upon which a person’s emotional distress can be compared and then classified as mild, moderate, or severe. Furthermore, as Study 2 indicated, repetitive experiences with racist speech reduced ethnic minority participants’ evaluations of harm and increased their levels of desensitization. The resulting implications can lend support both to those who favor and to those who oppose hate speech regulation.

On one level, the data may support freedom of expression. That is, even though racist slurs are offensive, it appears that greater exposure to such utterances actually may have strengthened ethnic minority participants’ tolerance and restraint (Hyde & Fishman, 1991). On the other hand, the data may suggest that the harmful effects of racist speech cannot be redressed within the current legal system. As critical race scholars (e.g., Lederer & Delgado, 1995; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993) have argued, legal remedies are not able to realize fully the harmful nature and effects stemming from deprecating speech. Study 2 may demonstrate that the tort of intentional infliction of emotional distress is too blunt of an instru-
ment to register the harm incurred by racist speech. Emotional desensitization to racist slurs does not necessarily mean the absence of harm. This particular tort fails to capture other injurious outcomes common in this context, such as isolation, lowered self-esteem, and internalization of inferiority. Hence, Study 2 may strengthen critical race scholars’ appeal for new sanctions in response to hate speech.

General Discussion

The purpose of these studies was to take stock of four accounts that may govern theory and research on intergroup perceptions of racist speech. The findings confirm that social identity theory is unquestionably a powerful theoretical construct, emerging as an appropriate and relevant foundation for understanding racist speech (e.g., harmful speech model; see Leets & Giles, 1999). The results also suggest that social identity dynamics alone are not able to fully account for the level of harm attributed to racist speech. At least two other complementary explanations, complexity-extremity and desensitization theories, also shed light on factors that mitigate the intensity level of perceived harm.

From a theoretical vantage point, social identity theory has played an influential and leading role in explaining intergroup interactions and relations (Worchel, Morales, Páez, & Deschamps, 1998). Not surprisingly, the desire to maintain and enhance a positive social identity provided good predictive ability for perceptions of racist speech harm. In accordance with the black sheep effect, European Americans were attempting to save face by dissociating from the blatant prejudicial statement of a deviant in-group member. By condemning the derogatory racial slur, they were renouncing the message (or at least avoiding the appearance of being prejudiced) and trying to preserve a positive social identity. Likewise, ethnic minorities who valued their heritage also perceived more harmful message effects. In the face of rejection or an attempt at stigmatization, ethnic participants tended to protect their group’s positive social identity.

Both the complexity-extremity and desensitization theories appear useful in explaining why Whites and ethnic minorities evaluate the effects of racist speech differently. The results suggest that cognitive schemata mediate attributions of harm. Regardless of ethnicity, participants who have had more experience with racist slurs made more moderate evaluations of harm, whereas those with less exposure reported more extreme judgments. Relatedly, ethnic participants who had more, as opposed to less, experience with epithets also self-reported a decrease in emotional responsiveness to the utterances. Similar to media violence, repeated exposure to racist speech may
result in a kind of psychological blunting or a desensitization process. Future research should compare the frameworks and assess the capacity of each account to predict the perceptions of racist speech harm. Do perceptions vary as a result of a person’s experience (cognitive schema), desensitization, or a combination of both?

Besides informing theoretical implications, this investigation also contributes to the discussion of legal and other regulatory reactions to hate speech. The controversy is often framed from two competing positions that seem intractable: free speech versus equality. However, it is rare that interests are completely opposed or perfectly compatible. Arguably, this controversy is reconcilable on an ideological level. That is, both sides condemn dignity harm and acknowledge a commitment to freedom of expression. So-called First Amendment absolutists favor overprotecting speech, whereas critical legal scholars favor equality or the elimination of racism by regulating speech. Conceivably, there is room to shift to a moderate position that falls at or near the middle of the response dimension.

Free speech advocates argue that speech cannot be banned merely because it is offensive and that such restraint constitutes a central test of a community’s commitment to free expression (Gunther, 1995). Yet Downing (1999) asked, “So is the First Amendment . . . a sacred cow? Should legal protections from hate speech be sacrificed to it?” (p. 178). Along these lines, perhaps there is room to provide legal accountability or victim compensation in some contexts. Heyman (1996) articulated a middle-ground position through a rights-based model. He argued that when hate speech violates rights to personal security, privacy, dignity, emotional well-being, and full and equal citizenship, it may be restricted unless the value of the speech in question outweighs the injury to these rights.

On the other hand, critical legal scholars argue that words can injure and exclude (e.g., Matsuda et al., 1993). Recent research has confirmed that the effects of hate speech can be not only injurious but traumatic, with responses mirroring a three-stage sequence found within other tragic events (see Leets, in press). Moreover, the absence of legal redress for hate speech actually may perpetuate racism, as the law is the official embodiment of societal values (Lederer & Delgado, 1995). Yet empirical attempts to directly link racist speech to harmful effects indicate that mediating factors would increase the difficulty of litigation (Leets, 1999; Leets & Giles, 1997). Presumably, legal action is not the only remedy for dignity harm. There are other ways to recognize the dehumanizing experience of racist speech.

For example, restorative justice, an emerging movement and a paradigm for criminal and community justice, may provide a proactive blueprint to manage harmful speech effects. Although hate speech is not recognized as a
crime under the law, the core values of the restorative justice model still can apply. As an alternative to the retributive model that focuses on determining guilt and delivering appropriate punishment, the restorative justice model emphasizes the role of victims and communities in the justice process. Responses to transgressions use a three-dimensional collaborative process among the offender, victim, and the community (Bazemore & Umbreit, 1995). As Bazemore (1998) stated, “If crime is in fact about harm, justice cannot be achieved simply by punishing or treating offenders. Rather, justice processes must promote repair or an attempt to heal the wound crime causes” (p. 769). Given that racist speech can cause harm both to individuals (Leets, in press) and to communities (Leets & Bowers, 1999), it is important to address both the micro- and macrolevels, which restorative justice accomplishes. Turning our attention to victim reparation and rebuilding intergroup relations may be even more productive in this context than primarily focusing on offender punishment and incarceration. The next step would be to determine how best to repair the dignity harm of hate speech. What are effective strategies to affirm the worth and importance of targets? If breached, what will restore a sense of community or solidarity? How can interethnic communities strengthen their cohesion?

It is important to acknowledge some limitations of the studies. One shortcoming deals with the issue of generalizability or representativeness. The convenient sample of college students constrains the applicability of these results. Future research may want to examine how people in different life stages such as adolescence or middle adulthood perceive racist speech, because ethnic identity development research suggests individuals’ attitudes are manifested at different stages of the life span (Cross, 1991; Plummer, 1996). In terms of operationalizations, the measurements for the theoretical frameworks could be further refined. In particular, the expectancy theory measures were less than optimal. The items were not highly reliable, and ideally, separate expectancy and valence questions should have distinguished positive and negative violations from positive and negative confirmations. In addition, self-reported responses limited both studies, especially given the fact that social desirability biases may have influenced them. A further drawback to Study 2 was the exposure manipulation. It should be noted that respondents who had high exposure to racist speech were usually rated 5 on a 7-point scale. Ideally, these respondents should have self-reported a 6 or 7. Study 1 was higher in external validity than Study 2. Whereas the second study had limited generalizability with only one message and ethnic group, Study 1 had multiple message replications, minimizing validity threats common to single-message designs (Brashers & Jackson, 1999; Jackson, 1992). Moreover, the messages in Study 1 varied across...
the three primary and most conspicuous ethnic minority populations in the United States: African, Hispanic, and Asian Americans. Generalizability also increased by basing the stimulus material on actual, not hypothetical, statements.

Nonetheless, these studies sharpened our insight into the theoretical accounts underlying racist speech harm. Given that racist speech can serve as a lightning rod to exacerbate intergroup tensions, it is important to remember that ethnic conflict is a quintessential, ongoing feature of all multi-ethnic societies. The most achievable objective is not total elimination but as much containment as possible (Marger, 1997; Weiner, 1998). Perhaps another way to look at the social identity management strategies is through a fundamental theme in social life: dignity (Harcum, 1994). Certainly, the theme of dignity underlies the perceived harm of racist speech. People want others to value and esteem them. Just as tolerance of diversity is recognized as a socially vital norm, so respecting each other’s dignity should be as important as having clean air and water and a healthy physical environment (Slifka, 1998).

Notes

1. The author would like to thank W. James Potter, Michael Roloff, and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this article. In addition, the data collection was possible only with the help and generosity of numerous colleagues across the nation. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 7th International Conference on Language and Social Psychology. Correspondence should be addressed to the author at the Department of Communication, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305; e-mail: leets@stanford.edu.

2. An extensive literature within the social sciences has shown that there are numerous variables that can influence evaluators’ attributions. Past research on perceptions of racist speech harm has clearly demonstrated that two contextual variables appear to be important: ethnic group membership and message explicitness (direct and indirect). This study took both variables into account. However, only direct racist slurs were examined, because indirect utterances have been examined elsewhere (e.g., see Leets, 1999). Direct racist slurs are undeniable and explicit, whereas indirect racist utterances are potentially deniable by the speaker and implicit (Searle, 1975). With regard to the intergroup dynamics, the majority or dominant ethnic group in contemporary American society is White Protestants of various national origins for whom ethnic identity has little significance (Marger, 1997). The minority or subordinate ethnic groups are non-White groups who have historically been disadvantaged in the United States (e.g., African, Asian, and Hispanic Americans).

3. All racist speech examples were operationally accepted at face value. Moreover, language intensity was not controlled across the messages. Previous research (Leets & Giles, 1997) revealed that perceptions of racist speech harm did not vary across severe and mild examples. Severe derogation includes cursing and/or threat of attack, whereas the mild cases include criticism and/or stereotypic derogation.
4. In addition, the hierarchical and standard regression analyses were conducted separately on each racist message. The results yielded the same patterns as those that emerged from the aggregation of the five ethnic slurs. The composite racist speech measure is the one reported in the article.

References


Leets • Perceptions of Racist Speech


