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Slurs, stereotypes, and in-equality: a critical review of “How Epithets and Stereotypes are Racially Unequal”

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Highlights

- Discusses recent empirical research on derogatory and non-derogatory uses of slurs.
- Discusses recent empirical research on negative and positive stereotypes.
- Discusses slurs and stereotypes for whites/European Americans and blacks/African Americans.
- Provides a critical analysis of recent empirical research on slurs and stereotypes.
- Suggests that slurs and stereotypes are context-sensitive rather than context-insensitive.

Abstract

Are racial slurs always offensive and are racial stereotypes always negative? How, if at all, are racial slurs and stereotypes different and unequal for members of different races? Questions like these and others about slurs and stereotypes have been the focus of much research and hot debate lately, and in a recent article Embrick and Henricks (2013) aimed to address some of the aforementioned questions by investigating the use of racial slurs and stereotypes in the workplace. Embrick and Henricks (2013) drew upon the empirical data they collected at a baked goods company in the southwestern United States to argue that racial slurs and stereotypes function as symbolic resources that exclude minorities but not whites from opportunities or resources and that racial slurs and stereotypes are necessarily considered as negative or derogatory irrespective of their particular context of use (pp. 197–202). They thus proposed an account of slurs and stereotypes that supports the context-insensitive position of Fitten (1993) and Hedger (2013) yet challenges the context-sensitive position of Kennedy (2002) and Croom (2011). In this article I explicate the account of racial slurs and stereotypes provided by Embrick and Henricks (2013), outline 8 of their main claims, and then critically evaluate these claims by drawing upon recent empirical evidence on racial slurs (both in-group and out-group uses) and stereotypes (for both whites and blacks) to point out both strengths and weaknesses of...
their analysis. Implications of the present analysis for future work on slurs and stereotypes will also be discussed.

**Keywords**

- Slurs;
- Stereotypes;
- Re-appropriation;
- Semantics;
- Pragmatics;
- Philosophy of language

1. **Introduction**

Are racial slurs always offensive and are racial stereotypes always negative? How, if at all, are racial slurs and stereotypes different and unequal for members of different races? Questions like these and others about slurs and stereotypes have been the focus of much research and hot debate lately (e.g., Walton and Cohen, 2003, Croom, 2011, Croom, 2013a, Croom, 2013b, Camp, 2013 and Jeshion, 2013), and in their recent article “Discursive Colorlines at Work: How Epithets and Stereotypes are Racially Unequal,” sociologists David Embrick and Kasey Henricks (2013) aimed to address some of the aforementioned questions by investigating the use of racial slurs and stereotypes in the workplace. Embrick and Henricks (2013) drew upon the empirical data they collected at a baked goods company in the southwestern United States to argue that racial slurs and stereotypes generally function to perpetuate white supremacy, racial antagonism, and racial inequality, i.e., that racial slurs and stereotypes function as symbolic resources that exclude minorities but not whites from opportunities or resources and that racial slurs and stereotypes are necessarily considered as negative or derogatory irrespective of their particular context of use (pp. 197–202). They thus proposed an account of slurs and stereotypes that supports the context-insensitive position of Fitten (1993) and Hedger (2013) yet challenges the context-sensitive position of Kennedy (2002) and Croom (2011). For example, although they briefly consider the point made by legal scholar Randall Kennedy (2002) that racial slurs like nigger are not necessarily considered as negative or derogatory racial insults, particularly when they are used within certain in-group contexts (e.g., when a racial slur towards blacks is used among fellow blacks, or when a racial slur towards whites is used among fellow whites), Embrick and Henricks (2013) are clear that they explicitly reject this point:

> Kennedy (2002) argues that the term [nigger] has been the most socially consequential racial insult, but adds that it need not be. The word carries little meaning without context and to say otherwise is to transform it into a fetish (Kennedy 2002). We disagree. The term cannot be abstracted from the context it is derived. It is inseparable from a history of white-on-black oppression in which whites enslaved, lynched, and murdered millions of blacks, and often did so as while using this particular slur. (p. 201, my emphasis)

Embrick and Henricks (2013) thus propose an account of slurs and stereotypes that is consonant with that suggested by other scholars like Ronald Fitten (1993) and Joseph Hedger (2013). For instance, in his article for *The Seattle Times* entitled “Fighting Words: No Matter Who Uses Them, Racial Slurs Ultimately Serve To Denigrate and Divide,” Fitten (1993) writes that:
More recently, the philosopher Joseph Hedger (2013) has argued in his article “Meaning and Racial Slurs: Derogatory Epithets and the Semantics/Pragmatics Interface” that:

No matter the context of conversation, the use of a slur is offensive and expresses contempt. Although Christopher Hom (2008) purports to give some examples of non-derogatory uses of slurs, I follow Anderson and Lepore (2013) in urging that these examples are clearly offensive. Furthermore, I have yet to find a single informant who sides with Hom (2008) on this issue. Hence, since a slur word is offensive in any context, the offensiveness is part of the semantic meaning of slur words, and is not a result of any peculiar use of slurs. (p. 209)

So in contrast with the context-sensitive position of scholars like Kennedy (2002) and Croom (2011) which argues that the use of racial slurs are not necessarily negative or derogatory and that whether the use of a racial slur is considered negative or derogatory is dependent on its particular context of use, Embrick and Henricks (2013) support the context-insensitive position of scholars like Fitten (1993) and Hedger (2013) which argues that the use of racial slurs are necessarily negative or derogatory and that whether the use of a racial slur is considered negative or derogatory is independent of its particular context of use (pp. 197–202). This is why Embrick and Henricks (2013) argue for the general or unqualified claim about racial slurs and stereotypes, that their use:

represent how white supremacy is preserved [...] to reinforce material inequities. Because acted-upon epithets and stereotypes are racially unequal, their consequences further crystallize each group’s location within the racial order. They serve as resources that impose, confer, deny, and approve other capital rewards in everyday interactions. That is, they further exclude racial minorities, blacks and Latinas/os in particular, from opportunities and resources, all the while preserving the superior status of whites. (p. 211)

In the next section I more fully outline the account of slurs and stereotypes proposed by Embrick and Henricks (2013) and explicate 8 of their main claims, before then turning to critically evaluate these claims by drawing upon recent empirical evidence on racial slurs (both in-group and out-group uses) and stereotypes (for both whites and blacks) to point out both strengths and weaknesses of their analysis. Finally, in the last section I conclude by reviewing our overall discussion of racial slurs and stereotypes and discussing implications for future work.

2. “How Epithets and Stereotypes are RaciallyUnequal”

In their study Embrick and Henricks (2013) investigated the use of slurs and stereotypes in the workplace by conducting a 6-month case study with the staff of a baked-goods company in the southwestern United States (pp. 199–201). This case study involved informal observations and semi-structured interviews of 38 members from work, or approximately 20% of the company workforce. Informal observations were recorded five days a
week and semi-structured interviews consisted of 50 questions dealing with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The gender profile for this group of participants was 90% men and 10% women, and the racial profile for this group of participants was 50% White, 25% Black, 20% Latina/o, and 5% Asian (for further discussion on methodology see Section 3).

Based on the results of their investigation Embrick and Henricks (2013) concluded that racial slurs and stereotypes against “whites” are not equivalent to racial slurs and stereotypes against “non-whites” or “racial minorities, blacks and Latinas/os in particular” (p. 197). Embrick and Henricks (2013) summarized the results of their study as follows:

> From our data, we contend stereotypes are racially unequal in two ways. One, they disproportionately describe whites positively and blacks and Latinas/os negatively. And two, white stereotypes are more three-dimensional, pluralistic, and even contradictory in nature, whereas nonwhite stereotypes, especially black and Latina/o ones, characterize these groups in a one-dimensional, monolithic manner. (p. 207)

Further claims by Embrick and Henricks (2013) about how slurs and stereotypes are racially unequal include the claims that “racial slurs and stereotypes applied to whites by non-whites do not carry the same meaning or outcomes as they do when these roles are swapped” (p. 197), that “Whereas *nigger* and *wetback* are terms typically attached to *all* members of each respective group, some of the most popular white slurs, especially *honky* and *cracker*, have historically been reserved for segments of the white population” (p. 205), that “racial epithets directed toward whites are unlikely to affect their life chances in the same way that racial epithets directed toward minorities do” (p. 197), and that “Whites have power and agency to deny and apply epithets and stereotypes to themselves and other groups, while blacks and Latinas/os do not possess such power or privilege” (p. 198). For the sake of clarity I explicate 8 of the main claims (C1–C8) maintained by Embrick and Henricks (2013), with (C1)–(C4) concerning racial stereotypes and (C5)–(C8) concerning racial slurs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (\text{(C1):})</td>
<td>Stereotypes of whites are positive whereas stereotypes of non-whites are negative. (p. 207)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (\text{(C2):})</td>
<td>Stereotypes of whites are pluralistic whereas stereotypes of non-whites are monolithic. (p. 207)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (\text{(C3):})</td>
<td>Stereotypes applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as stereotypes applied to non-whites. (p. 197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (\text{(C4):})</td>
<td>The power to apply and deny stereotypes is held by whites whereas the power to apply and deny stereotypes is not held by non-whites. (p. 198)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (\text{(C5):})</td>
<td>Slurs applied to whites are restricted in that they apply to some (but not all) of its prototypical members whereas slurs applied to non-whites are unrestricted in that they apply to (not some but) all of its prototypical members. (p. 205)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (\text{(C6):})</td>
<td>Slurs applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as slurs applied to non-whites. (p. 197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (\text{(C7):})</td>
<td>Slurs applied to whites do not affect their life chances whereas slurs applied to non-whites do affect their life chances. (p. 197)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(C7): The power to apply and deny slurs is held by whites whereas the power to apply and deny slurs is not held by non-whites. (p. 198)

(C8): Claims (C1), (C2), and (C3) are further clarified with the table that Embrick and Henricks (2013) provide outlining “Common Stereotypes for Whites, Blacks, and Latinas/os” (see Table 1, p. 207).

Table 1.
Common Racial Stereotypes Reported by Embrick and Henricks (2013, p. 207).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Latinas/os</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic (in principle, everyone is equal)</td>
<td>Lazy, no work ethic, undependable</td>
<td>Hyper-sensitive to racial issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meritocratic (success is based on hard work and determination)</td>
<td>Hyper-sensitive to racial issues</td>
<td>Culturally distinct; group-, familial-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite, powerful (possesses much privilege and authority)</td>
<td>Biologically different: intellectually inferior, beast-like physical features</td>
<td>Inhuman, animal-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noble, humanitarian</td>
<td>Dependency mentality (“freeloader” mindset)</td>
<td>All of Mexican decent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Hillbilly,” “rednecks”</td>
<td>Primitive, savages, inhuman</td>
<td>Prone to violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich and wealthy</td>
<td>Deviant, criminal-minded</td>
<td>Lazy, no work ethic, undependable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthless</td>
<td>Destined for menial, physical labor</td>
<td>Prone to violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prone to violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this table Embrick and Henricks (2013) suggest that stereotypes for whites are almost exclusively positive: with the exception of two slightly insulting names (i.e., “Hillbilly” and “rednecks”) they ascribed whites predominantly positive stereotypes including “Individualistic,” “Meritocratic,” “Elite,” “powerful (possess much privilege and authority),” “noble,” “humanitarian,” and “Rich and wealthy” (p. 207). Yet Embrick and Henricks (2013) suggest that stereotypes for blacks, in contrast to those for whites, are exclusively negative: without exception they ascribed blacks exclusively negative stereotypes including “Lazy,” “no work ethic,” “undependable,” “Biologically different,” “intellectually inferior,” “beast-like physical features,” “Dependency mentality (“freeloader” mindset),” “Primitive,” “savages,” “inhuman,” “Deviant,” “criminal-minded,” “Worthless,” “Destined for menial, physical labor,” “Prone to violence,” and “Hyper-sensitive to racial issues” (p. 207).² Given their assumption that stereotypes for blacks are exclusively negative whereas stereotypes for whites are for the most part positive, Embrick and Henricks (2013) suggested that “white epithets carry no real negative consequences for most whites” and that “whites [and whites alone] are afforded sanctuary from epithets and stereotypes that have historically justified the mistreatment of certain groups of people” (p. 198). Before arguing in the next section that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C1), (C2), (C4), (C5), (C7), and (C8), I first argue in this section that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are correct in arguing for (C3) and (C6).
First consider claim 3 (C3) by Embrick and Henricks (2013), which asserted that stereotypes applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as stereotypes applied to non-whites (p. 197). Embrick and Henricks (2013) are correct in arguing for (C3) since there are studies supporting the claim that stereotypes applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as stereotypes applied to non-whites (i.e., whites and non-whites have different stereotypes). Consider for example research from the article “Assessing Stereotypes of Black and White Managers: A Diagnostic Ratio Approach,” where psychologists Caryn Block et al. (2012) had participants assess stereotypes and rate the likelihood that characteristics from each scale of the diagnostic ratio approach were descriptive of black and white managers (p. E128). In agreement with (C3), evidence from this study suggests that stereotypes applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as stereotypes applied to non-whites, since “White managers were stereotyped as more competent, ambitious, and manipulative; whereas Black managers were stereotyped as more interpersonally skilled and less polished” (p. E128).³ Consider also research from the article “Effects of Racial Stereotypes on Judgments of Individuals: The Moderating Role of Perceived Group Variability,” where psychologists Carey Ryan et al. (1996) had participants judge the variability and provide trait and confidence judgments of hypothetical group members (p. 199). In agreement with (C3), evidence from this study suggests that stereotypes applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as stereotypes applied to non-whites, since “Blacks were seen as more likely to be violent and have run-ins with the police than Whites […] Similarly, Blacks were seen as less likely to be whimpy than Whites […] the data indicate that the stereotype of African Americans as aggressive [in comparison to European Americans] remains intact today” (p. 95). Further still, in her article “Race and the Re-Embodied Voice in Hollywood,” linguist Mary Bucholtz (2011a) analyzed a dataset of Hollywood films (n = 56) that were released between 1980 and 2008 and concluded from her analysis that throughout popular culture there was a “widely circulating ideology of black masculinity as hyperphysical and hypersexual (Hooks, 1992) and of white masculinity as physically awkward, uptight, and emotionally disconnected” (p. 259; Bucholtz, 1999). Evidence of this kind showing that stereotypes applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as stereotypes applied to non-whites therefore suggests that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are correct in arguing for (C3).

Next consider claim 6 (C6) by Embrick and Henricks (2013), which asserted that slurs applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as slurs applied to non-whites (p. 197). Embrick and Henricks (2013) are correct in arguing for (C6) since there are studies supporting the claim that slurs applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as slurs applied to non-whites (i.e., slurs applied to whites and non-whites have different meanings). Consider for example research from the article “Race and the Re-Embodied Voice in Hollywood” (Bucholtz, 2011a). In agreement with (C6), evidence from this study suggests that slurs applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as slurs applied to non-whites, since the meaning of the racial slur wigger or wigga applied to whites concerns primarily “a white male hip hop fan, typically middle-class and suburban, often laughably inauthentic” whereas the meaning of the racial slur nigger or nigga applied to blacks concerns primarily “urban African American youth [… ] being playas and gangstas – hard, cool, and down” (Bucholtz, 2011a, pp. 257, 259).⁴ Consider also two recent reports in the news, “Cracker’ Conveys History of Bigotry That Still Resonates” and “Where Did the N-Word Come From?” where CNN reporters Tom Foreman (2013) and Don Lemon (2013) discuss some of the history of racial slurs directed towards whites and blacks, respectively. In agreement with (C6), evidence from these reports suggest that slurs applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as slurs applied to non-whites, since the racial slur cracker applied to whites “is a demeaning, bigoted term […] a sharp racial insult that resonates with white southerners” (Foreman, 2013) whereas the racial slur nigger applied to blacks is a “dark, degrading hateful insult for African Americans” (Lemon, 2013). Evidence of this kind showing that slurs applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as slurs applied to non-whites therefore suggests that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are correct in arguing for (C6).

3. A critical analysis of “How Epithets and Stereotypes are Racially Unequal”

Having shown in the previous section that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are correct in arguing for (C3) and (C6), in this section I now turn to show that they are incorrect in arguing for (C1), (C2), (C4), (C5), (C7), and (C8).
First consider claim 1 (C1) by Embrick and Henricks (2013), which asserted that stereotypes of whites are positive whereas stereotypes of non-whites are negative (p. 207). Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C1) since there are studies supporting the claim that some stereotypes of whites are negative and that some stereotypes of non-whites are positive. For example, consider research from the article “The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness,” where Bucholtz (2001) conducted ethnographic fieldwork (1995–1996) on white American students at Bay City High School in San Francisco, California, and focused on investigating how these white American students enact and manage their social identities.5 In disagreement with (C1), evidence from this study suggests that whites do have negative stereotypes, which included characterizations of being “nerds,” “social underachievers,” “intellectual overachievers,” and “uncool” (p. 86). As Bucholtz (2001) explains, white students that enact “an extreme version of whiteness” are considered “nerds” and “are members of a stigmatized social category” (pp. 86, 85). Further support comes from research discussed in the article “Performing Blackness, Forming Whiteness: Linguistic Minstrelsy in Hollywood Film,” where linguists Mary Bucholtz and Oiuana Lopez (2011) analyzed a large dataset of Hollywood films and focused on investigating how these Hollywood films stereotyped white and black social identities (p. 682).6 In disagreement with (C1), evidence from this study suggests that whites do have negative stereotypes, which included characterizations of “white masculinity as inadequate” (p. 698), being “uptight” (p. 682), “physically and emotionally repressed” (p. 698), “inauthentic” (p. 698), and “deficient” in qualities “including coolness, physical toughness, and sexual self-confidence” (p. 682). As Bucholtz and Lopez (2011) explain, recent Hollywood films have popularly highlighted “the instability of racial, gender, and class hegemonies in the current sociohistorical era” which includes “a newly vulnerable white middle-class masculinity” (pp. 698, 681).

Further still, consider research from the article “Stigma Allure and White Antiracist Identity Management,” where sociologist Matthew Hughey (2012) conducted ethnographic fieldwork (2006–2007) on white American members of an antiracist group in the mid-Atlantic United States and focused on investigating how these members enact and manage their social identities.7 In disagreement with (C1), evidence from this study suggests that whites do have negative stereotypes, which included characterizations of being “inherently racist” (p. 231), “hypocrites reaping racial privilege from an unequal social order,” and “unerring beneficiaries of white supremacy” (p. 227). As Hughey (2012) explains, “The respondents in this study perceived their whiteness as inherently stigmatized due to their participation in racial segregation, their possession of racial stereotypes, and their lack of serious political and social unification with people of color” (p. 226). These findings are further supported with additional research from the article “Whiteness As Stigma: Essentialist Identity Work by Mixed-Race Women,” where sociologist Debbie Storrs (1999) conducted ethnographic fieldwork on mixed-race women of white and non-white ancestry in the northwestern United States and focused on investigating how these women enact and manage their social identities.8 In disagreement with (C1), evidence from this study suggests that whites do have negative stereotypes, which included characterizations of being “discriminatory,” “oppressive,” “racist,” “patriarchal,” “bland,” “tasteless,” “devoid of meaning,” and “boring as the spiceless foods they prefer” (pp. 195–196). As Storrs (1999) explains, “These women reject their white ancestry and culture because of their interpretation of this culture, and their ancestors, as racist, patriarchal, and discriminatory. Their narratives reveal that this negative characterization also captures, for them, the attitudes and behaviors of most whites […] as biased and prejudiced by virtue of their social location in the racial hierarchy” (pp. 197, 196).

Not only do Embrick and Henricks (2013) fail to acknowledge the robustness of negative stereotypes for whites, but they further fail to acknowledge the robustness of positive stereotypes for non-whites as well. For instance, consider research from the article “Thinking Well of African Americans: Measuring Complimentary Stereotypes and Negative Prejudice,” where psychologists Alexander Czopp and Margo Monteith (2006) conducted a study involving students (n = 4,404) in Lexington, Kentucky, and focused on investigating how students stereotyped white and black social identities. 9 In disagreement with (C1), evidence from this study suggests that blacks do have positive stereotypes, which included characterizations of being “hip” (p. 235),
“socially savvy” (p. 235), “friendly” (p. 243), “funny” (p. 243), “family-oriented” (p. 243), “confident” (p. 243), “ambitious” (p. 243), “proud” (p. 243), “respectable” (p. 243), “underappreciated” (p. 243), “successful” (p. 243), “smart/educated” (p. 243), “good speakers” (p. 243), “good cooks” (p. 243), “open-minded” (p. 243), “artistic” (p. 243), “full of soul” (p. 243), “musically talented” (p. 243), “good dancers” (p. 243), “good at sports” (p. 243), “muscular” (p. 243), “good looking” (p. 243), “fashionable” (p. 235), “very attractive and stylish in their appearance and their physical and verbal mannerisms” (p. 235), and exuding a sense of “sexual mystique” (p. 235), “social and sexual competence” (p. 235), and “a unique sense of ‘coolness’” (p. 235). As Czopp and Monteith (2006) explain, “Racial prejudice toward African Americans has been largely measured and researched in terms of negative and hostile attitudes. However, there is considerable research to suggest the prevalence of evaluatively positive beliefs about Blacks” (p. 233; see also Sniderman and Piazza, 2002). These findings are further supported with additional research from the article “The Co-Construction of Whiteness in an MC Battle,” where linguist Cecilia Cutler (2007) analyzed a dataset of recorded MC Battles and focused on investigating how whites and blacks stereotyped social identities in these filmed hip-hop battles (p. 682). In disagreement with (C1), evidence from this study suggests that blacks do have positive stereotypes, which included characterizations of being “authentic” (p. 10), “real” (p. 11), “urban” (p. 17), “streetwise” (p. 17), “cool” (p. 17), “artistic creators” (p. 10), “trend setters” (p. 10), and “entrepreneurs” (p. 10). As Cutler (2007) explains, “There is quite a powerful discourse within hip-hop that privileges the Black body and the Black urban street experience and despite the visibility of White rappers such as Eminem, Whiteness is still marked against the backdrop of normative Blackness” with “Whites [often] being [stereotyped as] wannabes and dilettantes who think they can cross racial boundaries and participate in another cultural domain” (pp. 10, 16; see also Cutler, 2009).

Further still, in their article “Performing Blackness, Forming Whiteness,” Bucholtz and Lopez (2011) offer evidence suggesting that, in disagreement with (C1), blacks do have positive stereotypes, which included characterizations of “coolness” (p. 682), “confidence” (p. 698), “sexual self-assurance” (p. 699), “physical toughness” (p. 682), and “the ability to speak forthrightly” (p. 698). Bucholtz and Lopez (2011) point out that recent Hollywood films have popularly highlighted “the instability of racial, gender, and class hegemonies in the current sociohistorical era” which includes an “apparently positive valorization of African American culture and identity” (p. 698). One last source of evidence suggesting, in disagreement with (C1), that blacks do have positive stereotypes comes from the article “Whiteness As Stigma,” where Storrs (1999) offers evidence suggesting that stereotypes of blacks included characterizations of being “more interesting,” “spicy,” and exhibiting “zest,” “finesse,” and “a sort of in your face attitude” (p. 195). As Storrs (1999) explains, since “in their family and personal experiences, whites are stigmatized as the oppressors,” and “Given the dichotomous construction of racial boundaries, women portrayed non-whites in a contrasting manner by highlighting positive cultural characteristics” (p. 197). Storrs (1999) further discusses how:

> the respondents in this study are not the only ones who are challenging racial meanings. In some ways, the women’s actions parallel the multiracial social movement that is occurring nationally. This larger movement attempts to shift racially mixed persons from a stigmatized category to one that is legitimately recognized and positively affirmed by the public. (p. 210)

Evidence of this kind showing that some stereotypes of whites are negative and that some stereotypes of non-whites are positive therefore suggests that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C1).

Next consider claim 2 (C2) by Embrick and Henricks (2013), which asserted that stereotypes of whites are pluralistic whereas stereotypes of non-whites are monolithic (p. 207). Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C2) since there are studies supporting the claim that stereotypes of non-whites (along with whites) are pluralistic rather than monolithic. Consider for example research from the article “Effects of Racial Stereotypes on Judgments of Individuals,” where Ryan et al. (1996) had participants judge target groups
with respect to 16 attributes that included both traits and attitude statements. In disagreement with (C2),
evidence from this study suggests that stereotypes of non-whites are pluralistic rather than monolithic, since
stereotypes for blacks included both negative and positive attributes. For instance, examples of negative
traits for blacks included “Poor” and “Superstitious” and examples of negative attitude statements for blacks included “I've had a lot of run-ins with the police” and “I just can't seem to keep a job very long,” whereas
examples of positive traits for blacks included “Streetwise” and “Emotionally expressive” and examples of
positive attitude statements for blacks included “I would enjoy singing in a church choir” and “I grew up close to
my cousins, aunts, and uncles” (Ryan et al., 1996, p. 86). The point here that stereotypes of non-whites are
pluralistic rather than monolithic has likewise been addressed in “Thinking Well of African Americans,” where
Czopp and Monteith (2006) explain that:

When discussing issues related to interracial conflict, many people tend to assume that Whites’
perceptions of Blacks largely reflect hostility and antipathy. However, there is a good deal of
research suggesting that Whites’ views of Blacks are not uniformly negative but represent a duality
of positive and negative attributes. (p. 233)

Evidence of this kind showing that stereotypes of non-whites (along with whites) are pluralistic rather than
monolithic therefore suggests that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C2).

Next consider claim 4 (C4) by Embrick and Henricks (2013), which asserted that the power to apply and deny
stereotypes is held by whites whereas the power to apply and deny stereotypes is not held by non-whites (p.
198). Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C4) since there are studies supporting the claim
that the power to apply and deny stereotypes is not held exclusively by whites. For example, consider research from the article ““Keepin’ It Real”: White Hip-Hoppers’ Discourses of Language, Race, and Authenticity,” where
Cutler (2003) conducted fieldwork in New York City on white hip-hop participants. In disagreement with (C4),
evidence from this study suggests that the power to apply and deny stereotypes is not held exclusively by whites, since they often have to “fight an uphill battle” against the many negative stereotypes directed against
them within a thriving hip-hop culture (p. 224). As Cutler (2003) explains:

Hip-hop’s rootedness in underprivileged urban African American communities as well as its inherent
antiestablishment ideology casts the participation of privileged white youth who represent part of
that establishment into stark relief. Within hip-hop, the unequal black-white binary is subverted;
blackness emerges as normative and authentic and whiteness – usually the unmarked invisible
category – becomes visible and marked. (p. 229)

Consider also research from the article “An Ay for an Ah: Language of Survival in African American Narrative
Comedy,” where linguist Jacquelyn Rahman (2007) analyzed the language use of speakers from a dataset of
comic narratives (n = 15) and focused on investigating how these comedic narratives stereotyped white and
black social identities (p. 682). In disagreement with (C4), evidence from this study suggests that the power
to apply and deny stereotypes is not held exclusively by whites, since Rahman (2007) shows how it is often the
case that:

African American characters are cast as humanly and culturally rich survivors whose common
sense and resilience allow them to “make a way out of no way.” In contrast, [the white middle-class]
establishment characters appear as narrowly logical, ethnically bland, and ineffectual. The positive
portrayal of African Americans is itself a tool of survival that stems from a self-empowering
Indeed, in their article “Stereotype Lift,” psychologists Gregory Walton and Geoffrey Cohen (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of relevant empirical studies (n = 43) on stereotypes and found that “When a negative stereotype impugns the ability or worth of an outgroup,” – where the out-group in cases like Rahman’s (2007) are those of the white middle-class establishment – “people [of the in-group] may experience stereotype lift – a performance boost that occurs when downward comparisons are made with a denigrated outgroup” (p. 456) which “is assumed to alleviate the doubt, anxiety, or fear of rejection [of in-group members] that accompanies the threat of failure” from engaging with those that are considered out-group members in relation to them (p. 457). 17

Further still, consider research from the article “Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing,” where psychologists Michael Norton and Samuel Sommers (2011) had participants (n = 417) rate on a 10-point scale the extent to which they felt both blacks and whites were the targets of discrimination in each decade from the 1950s to the 2000s (p. 216). In disagreement with (C4), evidence from this study suggests that the power to apply and deny stereotypes is not held exclusively by whites, since there is now “a broader belief in a new, generalized anti-White bias” and “That Whites now believe that anti-White bias is more prevalent than anti-Black bias” (p. 217). As Norton and Sommers (2011) explain, “White respondents were more likely to see decreases in bias against Blacks as related to increases in bias against Whites – consistent with a zero-sum view of racism among Whites” and that “not only do Whites think more progress has been made toward equality than do Blacks, but Whites also now believe that this progress is linked to a new inequality – at their expense” (p. 217). 18 Evidence of this kind showing that the power to apply and deny stereotypes is not held exclusively by whites therefore suggests that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C4).

Next consider claim 5 (C5) by Embrick and Henricks (2013), which asserted that slurs applied to whites are restricted in that they apply to some (but not all) of its prototypical members whereas slurs applied to non-whites are unrestricted in that they apply to (not some but) all of its prototypical members (p. 205). Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C5) since independent reports support the claim that slurs applied to non-whites (as with whites) are restricted in that they apply to some (but not all) of its prototypical members. One noteworthy source of evidence for this point comes from the memoir All Souls: A Family Story From Southie, where crime activist Michael MacDonald (2000) discusses how slurs were used in his linguistic community and offers evidence suggesting that, in disagreement with (C5), the racial slur nigger is in fact restricted in that it was used to apply to some (but not all) blacks. As MacDonald (2000) puts the point:

> Of course, no one considered himself a nigger. It was always something you called someone who could be considered anything less than you. I soon found out that there were a few black families living in Old Colony. They'd lived there for years and everyone said that they were okay, that they weren't niggers but just black. (pp. 60–61)

The “few black families living in Old Colony […] weren’t niggers but just black,” as MacDonald (2000) suggests, because “They'd live there for years and everyone said they were okay” whereas the term “nigger” was understood as “always something you called someone who could be considered anything less than you” (pp. 60–61). So in this case the racial slur nigger is restricted in that it is used by speakers to apply (if at all) to some blacks – specifically, just those that the speaker does not consider okay but rather as inferior or not okay – but not to all blacks. This is the explicit point MacDonald (2000) is making when he says of some of the black families living in Old Colony that “they weren’t niggers but just black” (pp. 61, my emphasis). 19 In “How to Do
Things with Slurs: Studies in the Way of Derogatory Words,” Croom (2013a) further suggests that racial slurs like nigger are restricted in that they are used (if at all) to apply to some (but not all) blacks, at least partly because the linguistic expressions nigger and black are understood to be of functionally distinct kinds and thus as having different conditions of application (Croom, 2011, p. 345). The erroneous assumption that the racial slur nigger must for the sake of felicity apply to all blacks (i.e., that the racial slur nigger is unrestricted), for instance, is grounded on the equally erroneous assumption that the linguistic expressions nigger and black are of the same functional kind, which has already been falsified in the extant literature (see for instance Croom, 2011 and Croom, 2013a). In other words, the use of racial slurs like nigger are not just restricted by racial descriptions like black but are further restricted by whether the speaker intends to convey an evaluative attitude towards the racial target or not. As Croom (2013a) explains the functional difference between these kinds of linguistic resources:

slurring terms such as nigger differ from descriptive terms such as African American [or black] in that the former is commonly understood to carry derogatory force whereas the latter is not […] That is to say, identifying someone as African American [or black] is not typically understood as an act of derogation but rather one of straightforward description, whereas identifying someone as a nigger typically is understood as an act of derogation. Accordingly […] slurring terms and descriptive terms are understood by speakers to be of functionally different kinds, and [so it follows] that speakers will in turn use these terms differently in their communicative exchanges. (p. 179)

Evidence of this kind showing that slurs are generally restricted in that they apply to some (but not all) of its prototypical members therefore suggests that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C5).

Next consider claim 7 (C7) by Embrick and Henricks (2013), which asserted that slurs applied to whites do not affect their life chances whereas slurs applied to non-whites do affect their life chances (p. 197). In further explicating this claim Embrick and Henricks (2013) assert that “white epithets carry no real negative consequences for most whites” and that “whites are afforded sanctuary from epithets and stereotypes that have historically justified the mistreatment of certain groups of people” (p. 198). Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C7) since there are studies and explicit reports supporting the claim that slurs applied to whites (along with non-whites) do affect their life chances. Consider for example how Foreman (2013) discusses the use of the racial slur cracker applied to whites and suggests that “for plenty of rural, white southerners, “cracker” is a demeaning, bigoted term […] a sharp racial insult that resonates with white southerners […] offensive and evidence of ill intent.” Consider also how Bucholtz (2011a) discusses the use of the racial slur wigger applied to whites and suggests that it primarily targets “white male hip hop fan[s], typically middle-class and suburban, [that are] often laughably inauthentic,” “illegitimate,” and stereotypically considered to possess a “failed masculinity” (pp. 257, 259). As Bucholtz (2011a) explains, the discriminatory effects of whites being targeted by racial slurs like cracker and wigger “rests on a widely circulating ideology of black masculinity as hyperphysical and hypersexual (Hooks, 1992) and of white masculinity as physically awkward, uptight, and emotionally disconnected (Pfeil, 1995)” (p. 259). Thus, insofar as racial slurs like cracker and wigger function to sharply insult their white targets, to express evidence of ill intent towards their white targets, or predicate or perpetuate stereotypically negative properties (such as being laughably inauthentic or having a failed masculinity) of their white targets, and insofar as social agents in general are negatively effected by being targeted in these ways, it stands to reason that racial slurs applied to whites are fully capable of affecting their life chances.

Consider further how Norton and Sommers (2011), in disagreement with (C7), suggest that there is an “emerging belief [that] reflects Whites’ view of racism as a zero-sum game, such that decreases in perceived bias against Blacks over the past six decades are associated with increases in perceived bias against Whites” (p. 215), that “Whites may fear that minorities’ imposition of their cultural values represent an attack on White
cultural values and norms” (p. 217), that “affirmative action policies designed to increase minority representation may focus Whites’ attention on the impact of quota-like procedures […] threatening their resources (Haley and Sidanius, 2006)” (p. 217), and that “these changes in Whites’ conceptions of racism are extreme enough that Whites have now come to view anti-White bias as a bigger societal problem than anti-Black bias” (p. 215). Storrs (1999) further explains how the mixed-race women in her empirical study often “construct whiteness as normative, empty, and bland but also as oppressive, prejudicial, and discriminatory” and accordingly “reject assimilation into whiteness in part because whiteness is stigmatized” (p. 194). Finally, Cutler (2007) has further argued that because of the “powerful discourse within hip-hop that privileges the Black body and the Black urban street experience […] that in this context interculturality plays a functional role in ratifying an alternative social reality in which Blackness is normative and Whiteness is marked” (pp. 10–11). This context, Cutler (2007) explains, is one in which a “critique [of] White hegemonic culture” takes place so that whites are often targeted as “wannabes and diletantistes who think they can cross racial boundaries and participate in another cultural domain” (p. 16).

Given the popularity and influence of hip-hop culture among people today, 22 and given the importance people place in being socially well regarded by others, it stands to reason that a white person being publically called out as a nerd or cracker could as a result have their life chances negatively affected (e.g., they may lose “social capital” or respect among peers or now seem less appealing to potential mates; for further discussion on how slurs can be strategically used among speakers as a means for the negotiation of social capital see Croom, 2013a, pp. 184–186). Indeed, in their article “The Effect of Negative Performance Stereotypes on Learning,” psychologists Robert Rydell et al. (2010) conducted three empirical studies to test how people could be negatively affected by negative stereotypes and argued that their “research shows that stereotype threat harms more than just the execution of skills in the stereotyped domain by demonstrating that stereotype threat [also] reduces learning” (p. 894). 23 More specifically, Rydell et al. (2010) explain that stereotyped targets could have their life chances negatively affected since negative stereotype threats can “trigger” or influence (a) “worries about confirming the stereotype” (see also Marx and Stapel, 2006), (b) “increased arousal” (see also Murphy et al., 2007), (c) “reduced working memory” (see also Schmader et al., 2008), (d) a “decrease [in] motivation to learn” (see also Steele, 1997), and (e) a reduction in the “encoding of novel information that is necessary for skill execution” (p. 894). Accordingly, insofar as through the application of a slur towards a target an associated negative stereotype can threaten that target by (a) increasing how much they are worrying, (b) reducing their working memory, (c) decreasing their motivation to learn, or (d) degrading their ability to encode novel information necessary for skillful action, and insofar as (a)–(d) can negatively affect ones life chances, then it follows that the application of a slur towards a target can resultantly affect their life chances also, regardless of whether that target is white or not. Evidence of this kind showing that slurs applied to whites (along with non-whites) can affect their life chances therefore suggests that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C7).

Finally, consider claim 8 (C8) by Embrick and Henricks (2013), which asserted that the power to apply and deny slurs is held by whites whereas the power to apply and deny slurs is not held by non-whites (p. 198). Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C8) since there are studies supporting the claim that the power to apply and deny slurs is not held exclusively by whites. Croom (2013a) for example discusses the use of the racial slur nigger and draws upon empirical data to explain that within the context of certain in-group speakers the slur can often be used as a norm reversed variant of the original paradigmatic derogatory use and can thus be understood between in-group speakers as non-derogatory (pp. 190–194; see also Sweetland, 2002). 24 As Bucholtz (2011a) likewise suggests, “The term [nigga] is generally used by […] some African Americans, especially men, as a neutral or even affiliative term of address and reference” (p. 260), so in disagreement with (C8), recent work by scholars such as Bucholtz, 2001, Bucholtz, 2011a, Bucholtz, 2011b, Croom, 2008, Croom, 2010, Croom, 2011, Croom, 2012, Croom, 2013a, Croom, 2014a, Croom, 2014b and Cutler, 2007, and Sweetland (2002) supports the earlier point made by Kennedy (2002) in Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word that racial slurs like nigger are not necessarily considered as
negative or derogatory racial insults, particularly when they are used within certain in-group contexts (e.g., when a racial slur towards blacks is used among fellow blacks, or when a racial slur towards whites is used among fellow whites). As Kennedy (2002) has previously pointed out, many blacks do in fact continue to exchange racial slurs non-offensively, “openly and frequently in conversations with one another” (p. 37; see also Spears, 1998), and as the hip-hop lyricist Talib Kweli has previously explained, “Our community has been using the word [nigger] and trying to redefine the context of it for a long time” and “the fact of the matter is that there’s a large segment of black people who grew up hearing the word intended as nothing but love” (quoted in Ecegoyen, 2006). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African American Research at Harvard University, similarly acknowledges that racial slurs like nigger are not necessarily considered as negative or derogatory racial insults, particularly when they are used within certain in-group contexts (Gates, 2009), and in a report on CBS Sports entitled “Lions’ Scheffler, Delmas Use Racial Slurs As Terms Of Endearment,” Ryan Wilson (2013) discussed the longtime friendship of fellow Lions teammates Tony Scheffler and Louis Delmas and explained that between the two of them “racial slurs are considered a term of endearment.” (This report about Tony Scheffler and Louis Delmas was similarly covered by Terry Foster (2013) in his article “For Two Lions, Racial Slurs Are Friendly Banter” and by Michael Smith (2013) in his article “Two Lions Say Racial Slurs Show Their Friendship.”) Def Jam Records founder Russell Simmons further explains from his perspective on popular culture that:

*When we say ‘nigger’ now, it’s very positive. Now all white kids who buy into hip-hop culture call each other ‘nigger’ because they have no history with the word other than something positive [...] When black kids call each other ‘a real nigger’ or ‘my nigger,’ it means you walk a certain way [...] have your own culture that you invent so you don’t have to buy into the US culture that you’re not really a part of. It means we’re special. We have our own language. (quoted in Jackson, 2005)*

Granted, Embrick and Henricks (2013) do briefly acknowledge how scholars like Kennedy (2002) have argued that every use of a racial slur like nigger “need not be” considered as a “racial insult” (p. 201), but Embrick and Henricks (2013) then immediately go on to brush aside the possibility that it might instead be used as a “term of affection or endearment by black people among black people” on the grounds that “whites rarely use it this way” (p. 201) and that it “is inseparable from a history of white-on-black oppression in which whites enslaved, lynched, and murdered millions of blacks” (pp. 201–202). But by forgoing more current consideration of the non-derogatory in-group use of the slur nigger simply because “whites rarely use it this way” (p. 201), Embrick and Henricks (2013) become guilty of what Bucholtz (2001) has identified as a “common scholarly misperception that the unmarked status of whiteness is impervious to history, culture, or other local conditions,” and that, “in viewing whiteness as a normative, hegemonic, and unmarked racial position, scholars may be unwittingly reifying a singular and static version of whiteness” (p. 84). By forgoing consideration of the non-derogatory in-group use of slurs Embrick and Henricks (2013) have also thereby failed to appreciate another point previously made by sociologist Norman Denzin (2001) in his article “Symbolic Interactionism, Poststructuralism, and the Racial Subject,” when he points out that “The meanings of any given racial terms can change, as when “black” became a signifier of pride as a result of the Black Power movement of the 1960s” (p. 246; see also Miron and Inda, 2000, Heffernan, 2005 and Fitzmaurice, 2010).

In other words, the meanings of our linguistic expressions are not rigidly fixated on points of the past and thus impervious to semantic change, but rather the meanings of our linguistic expressions are open to semantic evolution and re-negotiation as speakers continue to make strategic use and sense of these expressions in the communicative exchanges of their social life. So even if it is historically true, for instance, that the racial slur nigger “is inseparable from a history of white-on-black oppression” (Embrick and Henricks, 2013, p. 201), it is also true that the racial slur nigger is now also inseparable from a history of black-on-black non-oppresion by virtue of their widespread and conventional non-derogatory in-group use (Jackson, 2005 and Ecegoyen, 2006). Further, not only is the slur applied differently now and so updated and adjusted
in its significance, but speakers inevitably forget the past (horrible as it is), get old and die, and are replaced by new speakers, linguistic practices, and norms of expression. Consider for example research conducted by Associated Press-MTV involving 1,355 participants showing that 54% of respondents “think it’s OK to use them [slurs] within their own circle of friends” and that in such contexts the slur is non-offensive (Cass and Agiesta, 2011 and Greene, 2011). In her article “The N Word: Its History and Use in the African American Community,” Rahman (2012) had one of the participants from her study explain that, “You see, the people who say they’re offended are the older adults. Young kids don’t understand what the big deal is about the word. They know it’s about black people and slavery, but they’re like ‘that’s over’” (p. 161). Consider also research from the article “Anti-Social Media,” where social media analysts Jamie Bartlett et al. (2014) analyzed the language use of social media users from a dataset of collected tweets involving slur expressions (n = 126,975) and focused on investigating (i) the way that slurs are used on Twitter, (ii) the volume of slur-use on Twitter, and (iii) the potential for automated machine learning techniques to accurately identify and classify slurs (pp. 5–6). In disagreement with claim 8 (C8), evidence from this study by Bartlett et al. (2014) suggests that “Slurs are used in a very wide variety of ways – both offensive and non-offensive,” that “There were very few cases that presented an imminent threat of violence, or where individuals directly or indirectly incited offline violent action,” and that “Slurs are most commonly used [on Twitter] in a non-offensive, non-abusive manner: to express in-group solidarity or non-derogatory description” (pp. 6–7). 26

Furthermore, in their article “The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels: The Reciprocal Relationship Between Power and Self-Labeling,” psychologists Adam Galinsky et al. (2013) conducted ten empirical studies on re-appropriation to test its potential effects on speakers and listeners empirically and found that self-labeling with slurs can actually weaken their stigmatizing force (p. 1; see also Galinsky et al., 2003). More specifically, Galinsky et al. (2013) found the following results from their experiments 1 through 10 (E1)–(E10) which are relevant for our purposes here: (E1) showed that “participants in the high-power condition […] were more likely to label themselves with the derogatory term [such as nigger, honky, gook, chink, bitch, or slut] than were participants in the low-power condition” (p. 3), (E2) showed that “participants in the group-power condition were more willing to label themselves with a derogatory group label […] compared with participants in the individual-power condition” (pp. 3–4), (E3) showed that “Participants in the self-label condition recalled feeling more powerful […] than did those in the other-label condition” (p. 4), (E4) showed that “Self-labeling led observers to view the labeled person as more powerful” (p. 5), (E5) showed that “a stigmatized minority, was seen as more powerful in the self-labeling condition […] than in the other-label condition” (p. 5), (E6) showed that “self-labeling increased perceptions of the stigmatized group’s power” (p. 5), (E7) showed that “self-labeled participants viewed their own power as equivalent to the out-group member’s power,” or in other words, that “Self-labeling equalized the perceived power difference between the stigmatized self-labelers and the out-group individuals in the minds of the self-labelers” (pp. 6–7), (E8) showed that “Self-labeling increased perceptions of the stigmatized group’s power over the label, which attenuated the negativity of the label” (p. 7), (E9) showed that “Self-labeling improved the evaluation of a derogatory label relative to other-labeling” (p. 8), and (E10) showed that “Both men and women saw the stigmatizing label bitch as less negative and supported female empowerment more after witnessing a woman label herself with this term than after witnessing another person label her with it (or after no labeling)” (p. 8). Evidence of this kind showing that the power to apply and deny slurs is not held exclusively by whites therefore suggests that Embrick and Henricks (2013) are incorrect in arguing for (C8). 27

Although the study carried out by Embrick and Henricks (2013) on the use of slurs and stereotypes in the workplace offers an original contribution to the literature and has several merits, it has been demonstrated in this section that they incorrectly argue for (C1), (C2), (C4), (C5), (C7), and (C8), and that as a result their account of racial slurs and stereotypes remains inadequate. Arguably, Embrick and Henricks (2013) fail to provide an adequate account of racial slurs and stereotypes not because of a mistake with their empirical data but rather because of a mistake with the conceptual inferences or conclusions that they draw from their data, that is to say, Embrick and Henricks (2013) draw overgeneralized conclusions about racial slurs and
stereotypes from their data that extends beyond what their data legitimately warrants. Namely, Embrick and Henricks (2013) end up forming overly extreme and biased conclusions about the use of racial slurs and stereotypes because the population of speakers that they studied and drew their conclusions from was itself racially biased. Importantly, notice that the racial demographics of the staff at the company Embrick and Henricks (2013) investigated in the southwestern United States “was mostly white (50% White, 25% Black, 20% Latina/o, 5% Asian)” (p. 200, my emphasis).

The fact that most of the participants that Embrick and Henricks (2013) studied were white has important implications for the extent to which general conclusions about slurs can be drawn. Croom (2013a) for one has pointed out that “it is less likely than otherwise that derogation would occur in conditions where the [relevant] properties of the speaker and target are sufficiently similar [e.g., interlocutors of the same race are less likely to derogate each other on the basis of race], and less likely than otherwise that in-group signification would occur in conditions where the [relevant] properties of the speaker and target are sufficiently different [e.g., interlocutors not of the same race are less likely to signify in-group status on the basis of race]” (p. 199). So given the fact that there are a variety of different slurs that target members of different groups (e.g., cracker primarily targets whites whereas nigger primarily targets blacks), and given the fact that the use of racial slurs between speakers of the same race differ in their expressed offensiveness than the use of racial slurs between speakers of different races (e.g., the use of cracker between whites is relatively less offensive or non-offensive compared to the use of cracker by a black person towards a white person, and the use of nigger between blacks is relatively less offensive or non-offensive compared to the use of nigger by a white person towards a black person), it is clear that before Embrick and Henricks (2013) can legitimately draw general conclusions about the use of racial slurs and stereotypes they must not only consider “the paradigmatic derogatory use of slurs” (Croom, 2013a, p. 188) by “mostly white” out-group speakers towards non-white minorities but further consider “the non-derogatory in-group use of slurs” (Croom, 2013a, p. 190) among in-group speakers of the same race (e.g., the use of cracker among whites and the use of nigger among blacks, etc.). Given the fact that Embrick and Henricks (2013) only investigated the derogatory out-group use of slurs and stereotypes by predominantly white speakers towards non-white minorities and did not investigate the non-derogatory in-group use of slurs and stereotypes among non-white minorities themselves (cf. Brontsema, 2004, Croom, 2010, Croom, 2011, Croom, 2012, Croom, 2013a, Croom, 2014a and Croom, 2014b), it is not surprising that they mistakenly came to the overly broad conclusion that all slurs always function to perpetuate white supremacy, racial antagonism, and racial inequality (p. 197). In “The Semantics of Slurs: A Refutation of Pure Expressivism,” Croom (2014a) similarly criticized Hedger (2013) along with other linguists and philosophers of language (Kaplan, 1999, Kratzer, 1999, Potts, 2003, Potts and Kawahara, 2004, Potts, 2005, Potts, 2007, Pullum and Rawlins, 2007 and Potts et al., 2009) for also illegitimately drawing overly broad conclusions about the semantics of slurs (i.e., that all slurs always function to express offense) from biased or limited empirical data. Future work on slurs and stereotypes should proceed with care with regard to this point.

There are at least two further reasons to be concerned with the context-insensitive account of racial slurs and stereotypes proposed by Embrick and Henricks (2013). First, recall that their focus on how predominantly white speakers use racial slurs and stereotypes towards non-white minorities resulted in Embrick and Henricks (2013) arguing that racial slurs and stereotypes function as symbolic resources that exclude minorities but not whites from opportunities and resources (pp. 197–202). But this account seems to dangerously suggest that it is not possible for white targets to be negatively affected by racial slurs and stereotypes directed towards them and that as a result whites should never genuinely be considered the victims of racial discrimination and derogation. But such a suggestion remains unsupported by the empirical evidence and incorrectly suggests that whites are free from racial victimization. Given the robust evidence we reviewed suggesting that whites are not free from racial victimization in all contexts, one reason to be concerned with the account of racial slurs and stereotypes proposed by Embrick and Henricks (2013) is that it could unwittingly work to exclude whites but not minorities from opportunities and resources for their protection from racial discrimination.
Second, recall that their focus on how predominantly white speakers use racial slurs and stereotypes towards non-white minorities resulted in Embick and Henricks (2013) arguing that racial slurs are necessarily negative or derogatory irrespective of their particular context of use (pp. 197–202). But this account seems to dangerously suggest that it is not possible for in-group speakers to exchange racial slurs non-offensively and that as a result every use of a racial slur should genuinely be considered a form of racial discrimination and derogation. But such a suggestion remains unsupported by the empirical evidence and incorrectly suggests that robust populations of in-group speakers are naively wrong to think that they have been exchanging racial slurs non-offensively with each other, even among friends or in non-confrontational in-group contexts. Such a suggestion also incorrectly suggests that the re-appropriate use of racial slurs cannot weaken their stigmatizing force, but this conflicts with empirical evidence to the contrary recently provided in ten empirical studies (E1)–(E10) by Galinsky et al. (2013). Given the robust evidence we reviewed suggesting that in-group speakers can exchange racial slurs non-offensively, another reason to be concerned with the account of racial slurs and stereotypes proposed by Embick and Henricks (2013) is that it could be taken to condescendingly suggest that even in-group minority speakers explicitly claiming to use slurs non-derogatorily must in fact be using those slurs derogatorily, contrary to their “incorrect” self-reports, and that for some as-of-yet unexplained reason only out-group white majority speakers can really understand language and influence what it means. But there is no reason to suppose that the explicit reports of in-group minority speakers are any less credible than those of white majority speakers, or that only white majority speakers can influence the significance or meaning potential of language.

4. Conclusion

In their article “Discursive Colorlines at Work: How Epithets and Stereotypes are Racially Unequal,” Embrick and Henricks (2013) drew upon the empirical data they collected at a baked goods company in the southwestern United States to argue that racial slurs and stereotypes generally function to perpetuate white supremacy, racial antagonism, and racial inequality, i.e., that racial slurs and stereotypes function as symbolic resources that exclude minorities but not whites from opportunities or resources and that racial slurs and stereotypes are necessarily considered as negative or derogatory irrespective of their particular context of use (pp. 197–202). They thus proposed an account of slurs and stereotypes that supports the context-insensitive position of Fitten (1993) and Hedger (2013) yet challenges the context-sensitive position of Kennedy (2002) and Croom (2011). In order to critically evaluate the account of racial slurs and stereotypes provided by Embrick and Henricks (2013) the present article proceeded as follows. In Section 2 I outlined the account of racial slurs and stereotypes provided by Embrick and Henricks (2013) by explicating 8 of their main claims (C1–C8), and then I demonstrated that they were correct in arguing for (C3) that stereotypes applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as stereotypes applied to non-whites and (C6) that slurs applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as slurs applied to non-whites. The correctness of (C3) was demonstrated with studies showing that stereotypes applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as stereotypes applied to non-whites (i.e., whites and non-whites have different stereotypes) and the correctness of (C6) was demonstrated with studies showing that slurs applied to whites do not carry the same meaning as slurs applied to non-whites (i.e., slurs applied to whites and non-whites have different meanings).

In Section 3 I then took a critical turn against Embrick and Henricks (2013) and demonstrated that they were incorrect in arguing for (C1) that stereotypes of whites are positive whereas stereotypes of non-whites are negative (p. 207), (C2) that stereotypes of whites are pluralistic whereas stereotypes of non-whites are monolithic (p. 207), (C4) that the power to apply and deny stereotypes is held by whites whereas the power to apply and deny stereotypes is not held by non-whites (p. 198), (C5) that slurs applied to whites are restricted in that they apply to some (but not all) of its prototypical members whereas slurs applied to non-whites are unrestricted in that they apply to (not some but) all of its prototypical members (p. 205), (C7) that slurs applied to whites do not affect their life chances whereas slurs applied to non-whites do affect their life chances (p. 197), and (C8) that the power to apply and deny slurs is held by whites whereas the power to apply and deny slurs is not held by non-whites (p. 198). The incorrectness of (C1) was demonstrated with studies showing
that there are negative stereotypes of whites and that there are positive stereotypes of non-whites, the incorrectness of (C2) was demonstrated with studies showing that stereotypes of non-whites (along with whites) are pluralistic rather than monolithic, the incorrectness of (C4) was demonstrated with studies showing that the power to apply and deny stereotypes is not held exclusively by whites, the incorrectness of (C5) was demonstrated with studies showing that slurs applied to non-whites are restricted in that they apply to some (but not all) of its prototypical members, the incorrectness of (C7) was demonstrated with studies showing that slurs applied to whites do affect their life chances, and finally, the incorrectness of (C8) was demonstrated with studies showing that the power to apply and deny slurs is held by non-whites (along with whites).

To conclude, the purpose of this article was to critically evaluate the account of racial slurs and stereotypes provided by Embrick and Henricks (2013) by drawing upon recent empirical evidence on racial slurs (both in-group and out-group uses) and stereotypes (for both whites and blacks) covered from linguistics (e.g., Spears, 1998, Bucholtz, 2001 and Bucholtz, 2011a,b; Sweetland, 2002, Cutler, 2003, Cutler, 2007, Cutler, 2009, Brontsema, 2004, Rahman, 2004, Rahman, 2007, Rahman, 2012, Croom, 2010, Croom, 2012, Croom, 2013a, Croom, 2013b, Croom, 2014a and Croom, 2014b; Fitzmaurice, 2010 and Bucholtz and Lopez, 2011), sociology (e.g., Storrs, 1999, Lee, 2009a, Lee, 2009b, Hughey, 2012 and Bartlett et al., 2014), and psychology (e.g., Ryan et al., 1996, Steele, 1997, Galinsky et al., 2003, Galinsky et al., 2013, Walton and Cohen, 2003, Czopp and Monteith, 2006, Haley and Sidanius, 2006, Marx and Stapel, 2006, Murphy et al., 2007, Schmader et al., 2008, Rydell et al., 2010, Norton and Sommers, 2011 and Block et al., 2012) in order to discern which claims about racial slurs and stereotypes are in fact empirically plausible and which are not. In so doing, this article contributes to the literature on slurs and stereotypes by showing that (1) stereotypes for whites and non-whites need not be exclusively positive or exclusively negative but rather can contain a mixture of both positive and negative attributes, (2) stereotypes for both whites and non-whites are pluralistic rather than monolithic, (3) stereotypes for whites and non-whites do not contain the same attributes, (4) stereotypes can be applied and denied by both whites and non-whites, (5) slurs applied to both whites and non-whites can be restricted in that they apply to some (but not all) of its prototypical members, (6) slurs applied to whites and non-whites do not have the same meaning, (7) slurs applied to both whites and non-whites can affect their life chances, and (8) slurs can be applied and denied by both whites and non-whites. Finally, the aforementioned points (1), (2), (4), (5), and (8) suggest that a fully adequate account of slurs and stereotypes will require a context-sensitive rather than context-insensitive sensibility.

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