

When Using the “N-Word” Goes Wrong: Black Americans’ Perceptions and Affective Responses of Those Who Use the “N-Word”

Journal of Language and Social Psychology

1–31

© The Author(s) 2026

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0261927X251411967

journals.sagepub.com/home/jls

Sheba M. Aikawa¹ , Andre’ Oliver² , and Daryl A. Wout³ 

Abstract

The “n-word” remains one of the most offensive racial slurs, yet it is used by both Black and non-Black individuals. Across three studies (total $N = 1,063$), we examined how Black people perceive its use based on the speaker’s racial identity and racial self-identification, while also varying valence and context. In Study 1, we varied the target race who used the n-word (Black, Black–White biracial, White); in Study 2, we manipulated the valence in which the n-word was used (positive or negative); and in Study 3, we explored how a biracial person racially self-identified (Black-identified, biracial-identified, or Black-disidentified) shaped reactions. Black participants reported more negative perceptions and affective responses when a White (Studies 1 and 2) or Black-disidentified biracial (Study 3) target used the word, compared to Black, Black–White biracial (Studies 1 and 2), or Black-identified biracial (Study 3) targets, highlighting how racial identity shapes perceptions of those who use racial slurs.

¹Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA

²The Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

³John Jay College, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:

Sheba M. Aikawa, Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Colorado Boulder, Muenzinger D244, 345 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309, USA.

Email: Sheba.Aikawa@colorado.edu.

Keywords

“n-word”, racial slurs, social identity theory, hypodescent, Black–White biracial people

The “n-word” has a complex sociocultural history in the United States (King et al., 2018; Rahman, 2012). Originally used as a descriptor of Black people, it became a racial slur in the seventeenth century, tied to anti-Black violence and dehumanization (Asim, 2007; Price, 2011). During the 1970s, the Black Power Movement sought to reclaim the word, transforming “nigger” into “nigga” to express solidarity or ostracism depending on the context (Andrews, 2014).

While the “-er” version remains condemned, the “-a” derivation has become common in popular culture, used by both Black and non-Black individuals (King et al., 2018). Yet, research examining its impact has predominantly relied on White samples (O’Dea et al., 2021; Cabrera & Hill-Zuganelli, 2021). Of the few studies that have specifically focused on Black participants, Hudson et al. (2024) found that Black participants showed stronger implicit negativity toward both versions of the word than White participants. However, their design did not vary the social context or speaker identity, leaving open the question of how situational factors shape responses. The present research extends prior work by examining how Black individuals evaluate the “-a” derivation of the n-word when used by a Black, White, or Black–White biracial (biracial, hereafter) target in either a positive or negative context. Moreover, this research advances social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) by demonstrating how these perceptions are shaped by the user’s perceived racial group membership and intent. Specifically, we focus on Black people’s perceptions (i.e., perceived prejudice and inappropriateness) and affective responses (i.e., negative affect). Our aim is not to police the usage of the n-word, but to highlight the implications of its use for Black people.

Extending Social Identity Theory to Racial Slur Usage

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that people categorize others as ingroup or outgroup members, which shapes norms for acceptable behavior (Hornsey et al., 2002). These categorizations, based on perceived similarity in appearance, beliefs, and values (Abrams & Hogg, 1988), produce ingroup-favoring biases and leniency in ambiguous contexts (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996; Messick & Mackie, 1989). This bias extends to slur usage, where slurs used by ingroup (versus outgroup) members are perceived as less offensive (Puchala et al., 2025; Sturaro et al., 2023), partly because ingroup use can signal shared identity and reinforce solidarity (Croom, 2013). Speaker identity and perceived intent further shape interpretations (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; O’Dea et al., 2015), with ingroup

membership often signaling benign intent (Gibson et al., 2020; Sturaro et al., 2023). Consequently, slurs used by ingroup members are unlikely to be interpreted as malicious, potentially reducing perceived prejudice, inappropriateness, and negative affect. Although social identity theory largely implies that social agents would view such slur usage less negatively among ingroup members, the present work aims to test this hypothesis directly across several experiments with Black perceivers evaluating such slur usage amongst differing racial identities.

Slurs also function as explicit expressions of prejudice, used to either signal ingroup belonging or to dehumanize outgroups (Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985). Given the historical use of the n-word as a linguistic expression of prejudicial beliefs (Asim, 2007; King et al., 2018; Price, 2011), we directly measured perceived prejudice. For Black people, outgroup members (e.g., White individuals) who use the n-word likely convey antipathy and moral denigration, eliciting stronger negative perceptions and affect, whereas ingroup users (e.g., Black individuals) may reflect cultural expression or solidarity, minimizing negative responses.

We additionally distinguish prejudice from inappropriateness, such that inappropriateness may reflect a violation of social norms (Hess, 2021), or at minimum a disregard for the potential harm that using the n-word may cause Black Americans (Bolinger, 2017). Thus, a person may be judged as inappropriate without necessarily being viewed as prejudiced. Slurs like the n-word are also deeply affective, evoking strong negative emotional reactions, particularly for those who associate it with discrimination or violence (Rappaport et al., 2019). Therefore, we examined affective responses to the n-word's use as well. Due to the harmful history of the word and consistent with prior research on slur usage (Puchala et al., 2025; Sturaro et al., 2023), we predicted that a White (i.e., outgroup member) targets' use of the n-word would be perceived as more prejudiced, more inappropriate, and elicit more negative affective responses than a Black (i.e., ingroup member) targets' use (**H1**), perhaps because of the lack of perceived ill intent toward Black people.

Finally, it remains unclear how biracial individuals are perceived when using the n-word. Black people often perceive biracial individuals as racial ingroup members (Barnett & Wout, 2016; Davis, 1991; Ho et al., 2011, 2017; Gaither et al., 2016; Oliver et al., 2024; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Smith & Wout, 2019; Wout et al., 2025), based on similar phenotypic features (Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Gaither et al., 2016), cultural alignment, lived experiences (Barnett & Wout, 2016; Smith & Wout, 2019), and expectations of more positive treatment compared to White individuals (Wout et al., 2025). Accordingly, if biracial individuals are viewed as ingroup members, their use of the n-word should elicit fewer negative reactions and be perceived as less ill-intended than when used by White individuals. Based on this reasoning, we hypothesize that Black people will perceive a White (i.e., outgroup member) target who used the n-word as more prejudiced, more inappropriate, and would elicit more negative affective responses than a Black *or* biracial (i.e., ingroup member) target (**H1**). The current research examines these dynamics to extend social identity theory to the use of racial slurs across racial group boundaries.

Racial Categorization: Hypodescent

Racial categorization refers to the psychological tendency to group others by race using perceptual and conceptual cues such as skin tone and facial features (Pauker et al., 2016). This process can be ambiguous for individuals with one Black and one White parent (Young et al., 2013). Historically, the principle of *hypodescent*, which classifies mixed-race individuals as members of their lower-status racial group, has led both Black and White perceivers to categorize biracial individuals as Black (Davis, 1991; Ho et al., 2011; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Barnett & Wout, 2016; Gaither et al., 2016; Ho et al., 2017; Smith & Wout, 2019). Motivations differ, with White Americans applying hypodescent to maintain social hierarchies (Davis, 1991; Franco et al., 2019), while Black Americans apply it more inclusively (Ho et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2024; Wout et al., 2025). Biracial individuals may also experience *racial fluidity*, where their categorization shifts depending on the context, stereotypes, or self-identification (Cooley et al., 2018; Sanchez et al., 2009). For example, Black perceivers viewed biracial targets as ingroup members unless they self-identified as White, in which case they were seen as less ingroup and more prejudiced compared to Black targets (Smith & Wout, 2019). Given this research, few differences should emerge between Black and biracial targets when using the n-word by default (**H2**). However, biracial targets who disavow their Black identity should incur more negative perceptions and affect (**H3**), likely due to a shift in perceived ill intent toward Black people.

Overview of the Studies

The current studies examined Black people's perceptions and affective responses to n-word use. Each study used a 2 (slur usage) $\times$ 3 (target race) between-subjects design. A power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) indicated that for six groups with two degrees of freedom in the numerator, to detect an effect at $p < .05$ with 80% power and $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ (a conservative effect size estimate), a minimum of 315 participants per study would be required.

In Study 1, Black participants evaluated a male target (Black, biracial, or White) who either used or did not use the n-word when positively describing his Black friend. Study 2 added a valence manipulation of the slur's use (positive vs. negative). Study 3 explored whether a biracial target's racial self-identification (as Black-identified, biracial-identified, or Black-disidentified) influenced responses. All targets were male, as men are more likely to use strong swear words (Güvendir, 2015).

We hypothesized that: (**H1**) participants would respond most negatively to White targets using the n-word, regardless of valence (Studies 1 and 2); (**H2**) participants' responses to Black and biracial targets would be similar, reflecting perceptions of biracial individuals as ingroup members (Studies 1 and 2); and (**H3**) biracial targets who disidentified with Blackness would elicit more negative perceptions and responses (including lower perceived group membership and greater ill intent toward Black

people) than those who self-identified as Black or biracial (Study 3). All study materials, data, and syntax are available on the OSF page: https://osf.io/yhzvm/overview?view_only=34a74aae0e3b45959e0d615bcbb7f09b.

Study 1

Study 1 investigated Black participants' perceptions and responses to a Black, biracial, or White male target who used the n-word to describe a Black friend. Participants were randomly assigned to view a profile in a 2 (slur usage: no n-word vs. n-word) $\times$ 3 (target race: Black vs. biracial vs. White) between-subjects experiment. In the profile, the target described one positive and one negative characteristic of their friend, with the n-word either included in the positive characteristic description or omitted. We hypothesized that when the Black and biracial targets used the n-word, they would elicit similar reactions (**H2**), while the White target would induce the most negative perceptions and responses (**H1**).

Method

Participants. To account for exclusions, we recruited 358 self-identified Black American adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.43$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.63$; 47.4% female) from Prolific to participate in this online study. Participants received \$1.11 as compensation. We excluded participants who did not identify as monoracially Black ($n = 5$) or failed attention checks regarding the target person (race = 22, gender = 3) and the target person's friend (race = 4, gender = 3). Due to exclusions, we had a final sample of 308 participants. A sensitivity analysis using the 'pwr' package (Champely, 2017) in the R programming language indicated that this sample provided 80% power to detect a minimum effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.23$ for condition effects, $\eta_p^2 = .03$ for ANOVA main effects, and $\eta_p^2 = .02$ for ANOVA interaction effects.

Procedure and Measures. Reliabilities and correlations from Study 1 for all outcome variables are in Table 1. After consenting, participants learned that the study aimed to investigate how people form first impressions of others when given minimal information. They were told that they would be randomly assigned to read a profile written by a student describing one of his friends. We then explained that we would like them to use the information in the profile to form an impression of the author. This was done to emulate an online environment in which people often form impressions of others based on minimal information (Bacev-Giles & Haji, 2017). Participants were then randomly assigned to read the written profile of a self-identifying Black, biracial, or White target, who described one positive and one negative characteristic of their friend, who was Black. In the n-word condition, the target used the n-word to describe a positive characteristic of their friend (i.e., *Positive characteristic*: "The best thing about Tyrone is that he's extremely loyal. I feel like I can always count on that nigga."), while for participants in the no n-word condition, the target made the same statement, but the

Table 1. Measure Information and Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations for Study 1.

Measure	M (SD)	1	2	3
1. Perceptions of target's prejudice	2.56 (1.34)	(.84)		
2. Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	2.85 (1.64)	.73***	(.89)	
3. Negative affect	1.39 (0.75)	.61***	.65***	(.87)

Note. The reliability for each scale is shown on the diagonal.

*** $p < .001$.

phrase “that nigga” was replaced with the word “him.” Across both conditions, for the negative characteristic, the target stated: “The bad thing about Tyrone is that he’s always distracting me. Whenever he’s around, I can’t seem to get any work done” (see Supplemental Materials to view profiles).

Participants then completed measures assessing their perceptions of the target’s level (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) of *prejudice* (three items [prejudiced, biased, racist]; i.e., This person is prejudiced), *inappropriateness* (three items [inappropriate, insensitive, offensive]; i.e., This person is inappropriate), and the target’s elicited (1 = *very slightly or not at all*, 5 = *extremely*) *negative affect* (four items [distressed, hostile, irritable, upset]; i.e., This person makes me feel upset.; modified from Watson et al., 1988) before answering demographic questions, and receiving debriefing and compensation.¹

Study 1 Results

To examine Black individuals’ perceptions (perceived prejudice and inappropriateness) and affective responses (negative affect) of those who use the n-word, we conducted three separate 2 (slur usage: no n-word vs. n-word) $\times$ 3 (target race: Black vs. biracial vs. White) between-subjects ANOVAs on each dependent variable (see Tables 2 and 3 for means, standard deviations, and full ANOVA results).

Perceptions of the target’s prejudice. For perceptions of the target’s level of prejudice, there was a main effect of slur usage ($p < .001$), a main effect of the target’s race ($p < .001$), and, consistent with our hypothesis, these main effects were qualified by a significant slur usage by target race interaction ($p = .021$). Moreover, the simple effects analysis revealed there was no differences based on the race of the target in the no n-word condition, $F(2, 302) = 1.12$, $p = .327$, $\eta_p^2 = .007$, but there were significant differences based upon the race of the target in the n-word condition, $F(2, 302) = 12.17$, $p < .001$, $2_p = .075$. Specifically, participants perceived the White target to be more prejudiced than both the Black ($p = .001$) and biracial ($p < .001$) targets when they used the n-word. Furthermore, participants did not report any significant differences in perceived prejudice between the Black and biracial targets ($p = 1.00$; see Figure 1).

Perceptions of the target’s inappropriateness. For the participants’ perception of the target’s level of inappropriateness, there were main effects of slur usage ($p < .001$)

Table 2. Study 1 Means and Standard Deviations for Target Profiles

Means and Standard Deviations Across Conditions													
Measures	Black				Biracial				White				
	No		N-word		No		N-word		No		N-word		
	(n = 54)		(n = 54)		(n = 48)		(n = 48)		(n = 53)		(n = 51)		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Perceptions of Target's Prejudice	2.26	1.10	2.51	1.25	2.03	1.17	2.58	1.21	2.41	1.01	3.60	1.70	
Perceptions of Target's Inappropriateness	1.99	0.98	3.07	1.63	2.06	1.05	3.01	1.35	2.54	1.14	4.46	2.10	
Negative Affect	1.20	0.56	1.37	0.74	1.16	0.48	1.39	0.73	1.26	0.57	1.99	1.00	
Measures	Black				Biracial				White				
	No		N-word		No		N-word		No		N-word		
	(n = 54)		(n = 54)		(n = 48)		(n = 48)		(n = 53)		(n = 51)		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Perceptions of Target's Prejudice	2.38	1.18	2.31	1.21	2.31	1.21	2.99	1.51	2.24	1.10	2.89	1.48	
Perceptions of Target's Inappropriateness	2.53	1.44	2.54	1.30	3.48	1.93	2.20	1.08	3.51	1.84	1.58	0.88	
Negative Affect	1.28	0.66	1.27	0.63	1.62	0.89	1.21	0.54	1.58	0.88	1.58	0.88	

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

Table 3. Study 1 Between-Subjects ANOVA Results for Target Profiles.

Measures	ANOVA Results										
	Target Race Condition				Slur Usage Condition				Target Race $\times$ Slur Usage Condition		
	<i>F</i> (2, 302)	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	<i>F</i> (2, 302)	<i>p</i>	η_p^2	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>d</i>	<i>F</i> (2, 302)	<i>p</i>
Perceptions of target's prejudice	9.54	<.001	.059	21.18	<.001	.066	0.66 (0.14)	0.38, 0.94	−0.50	3.89	.021
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	15.53	<.001	.093	64.86	<.001	.177	1.32 (0.16)	1.00, 1.64	−0.87	3.50	.032
Negative affect	8.51	<.001	.053	21.99	<.001	.068	0.38 (0.08)	0.22, 0.53	−0.51	4.92	.008
Comparisons Between Target Race Conditions											
Measures	Black vs. Biracial				Black vs. White				Biracial vs. White		
	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>
Perceptions of target's prejudice	0.08 (0.18)	−0.35, 0.50	1.00	0.06	0.62 (0.18)	0.21, 1.04	.001	−0.45	0.70 (0.18)	0.27, 1.13	<.001
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	0.01 (0.20)	−0.48, 0.49	1.00	−0.01	0.97 (0.20)	0.49, 1.44	<.001	−0.55	0.96 (0.20)	0.47, 1.44	<.001
Negative affect	0.01 (0.10)	−0.23, 0.25	1.00	0.01	0.35 (0.10)	0.11, 0.58	.001	−0.43	0.35 (0.10)	0.11, 0.59	.001

Note. *MD* = mean difference; *SE* = standard error.

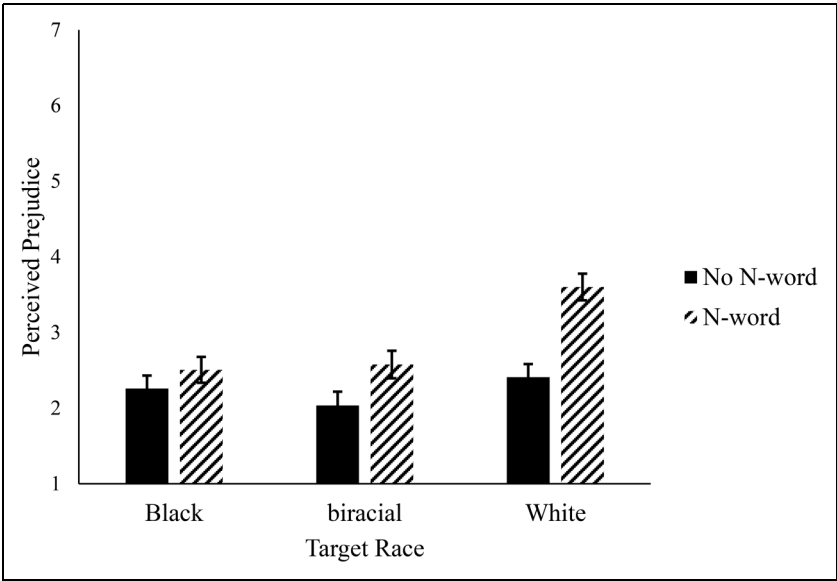


Figure 1. Study I mean scores for perceptions of the target's perceived prejudice. Note. Perceived Prejudice means for the Black, biracial, and White targets are shown. Error bars show standard errors.

and the target's race ($p < .001$). As predicted, these main effects were qualified by a significant slur usage by target race interaction ($p = .032$). As with perceived prejudice of the target, the simple effects analysis revealed there was no significant differences between the targets in the no n-word condition, $F(2, 302) = 2.23$, $p = .110$, $2_p = .015$, but there were significant differences based upon the race of the target in the n-word condition, $F(2, 302) = 16.61$, $p < .001$, $2_p = .099$. Specifically, participants perceived the White target as being more inappropriate than both the Black ($p < .001$) and biracial ($p < .001$) targets when they used the n-word. As with perceptions of the target's prejudice, there were no significant differences in participants' perceptions of the inappropriateness of the Black and biracial targets ($p = 1.00$; see Figure 2).

Negative affect. Again, a main effect of slur usage on negative affect ($p < .001$) and target's race ($p < .001$) emerged, which were qualified by a significant slur usage by target race interaction ($p = .008$). Simple effects analysis revealed there were no significant differences of the target's race in the no n-word condition, $F(2, 302) = 0.30$, $p = .738$, $2_p = .002$, but there were significant differences based upon the race of the target in the n-word condition, $F(2, 302) = 12.96$, $p < .001$, $2_p = .079$. Specifically, the White target provoked more negative affect than both the Black ($p = .001$) and biracial ($p = .001$) targets when they used the n-word. Moreover, participants did not perceive any significant differences in negative affect between the Black and biracial targets ($p = 1.00$; see Figure 3).

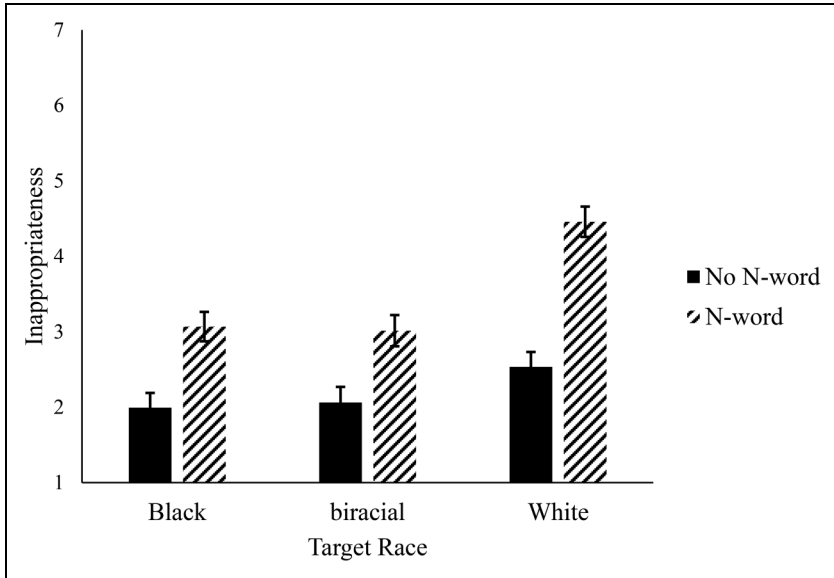


Figure 2. Study 1 mean scores for perceptions of the target's inappropriateness. Note. Inappropriateness means for the Black, biracial, and White targets are shown. Error bars show standard errors.

Study 1 Discussion

Study 1 examined Black participants' perceptions and responses to Black, biracial, and White individuals using the n-word. Consistent with **H1**, the White target elicited more negative perceptions and responses than the Black or biracial targets when using the slur, whereas no racial differences emerged without the slur, indicating its role in heightening racial salience. These findings contrast with O'Dea et al. (2015), who found that White participants viewed the n-word as less offensive when used between friends rather than strangers. In the present study, Black participants reacted negatively to the White target's use of the slur, even in positive contexts, suggesting they assumed ill intent.

Supporting **H2**, perceptions and responses to the Black and biracial targets did not differ, consistent with hypodescent and prior work, which shows that Black individuals view biracial people as ingroup members. Congruent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), these results indicate that racial group membership moderates Black people's responses to the n-word, although contextual factors may further shape these responses. Study 2 explored how usage valence (positive or negative) influences these dynamics.

Study 2

In Study 2, we attempted to extend the findings of Study 1 by examining whether the valence in which the n-word is used (positive or negative) interacts with the target's

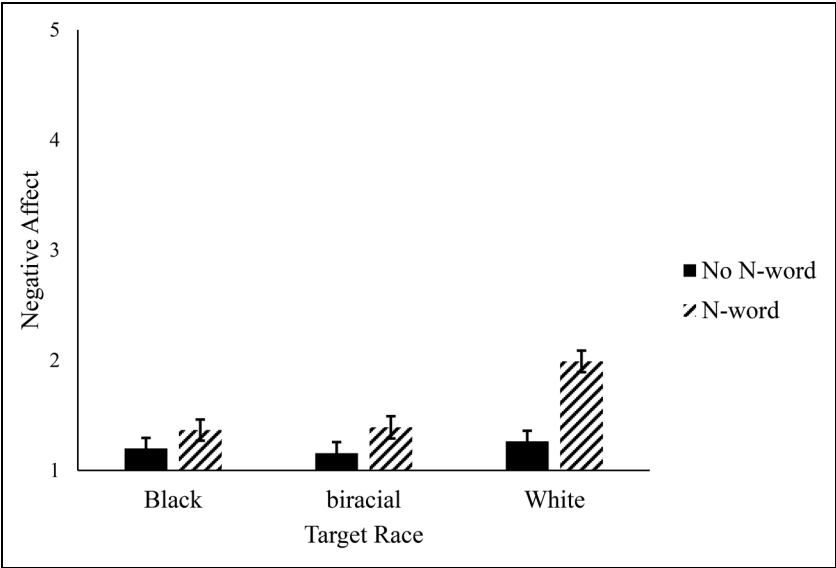


Figure 3. Study 1 mean scores for participants affective (negative) perceptions to the target profiles.

Note. Negative affect means for the Black, biracial, and White targets are shown. Error bars show standard errors.

race (Black, biracial, White) to influence Black participants’ perceptions. Participants viewed profiles of Black, biracial, or White targets describing one positive and one negative characteristic of their Black friend. Since Study 1 showed no racial differences when the n-word was not used, all participants in Study 2 saw profiles where the target used the n-word. Based on Study 1, we hypothesized that participants would respond most negatively to the White target, regardless of valence (**H1**), and would perceive the Black and biracial targets similarly, given their shared ingroup status (**H2**).²

Method

Participants. We recruited 408 self-identified Black American adults ($M_{age}=33.13$, $SD_{age}=11.12$; 59.5% female) from Prolific for this online study, compensating them with \$1.11. We excluded participants who did not identify as monoracially Black ($n=11$), incorrectly remembered information about the target person (race = 27, gender = 4), or the target person’s friend (race = 11, gender = 6). This resulted in a final sample of 363 participants. A sensitivity analysis using the ‘pwr’ package (Champely, 2017) in the R programming language indicated that this sample provided 80% power to detect a minimum effect size of Cohen’s $d=0.21$ for condition effects, $2_p=.03$ for ANOVA main effects, and $2_p=.02$ for ANOVA interaction effects.

Table 4. Measure Information and Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations for Study 2.

Measure	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	1	2	3
1. Perceptions of target's prejudice	3.15 (1.50)	(.84)		
2. Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	3.88 (1.81)	.74***	(.91)	
3. Negative affect	1.71 (1.04)	.66***	.61***	(.94)

Note. The reliability for each scale is shown on the diagonal.

*** $p < .001$.

Procedure and Measures. Reliabilities and correlations from Study 2 for all outcome variables are in Table 4.

The procedure for Study 2 was similar to Study 1, except all participants were exposed to the n-word condition and only the valence of the n-word usage was manipulated. Thus, the design was a 2 (statement valence condition: positive vs. negative) $\times$ 3 (target race: Black vs. biracial vs. White) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of six profiles from a self-identifying Black, biracial, or White target.

Using the same positive and negative statements from the Pilot Study, within the profiles, the target used the n-word to describe either a positive or negative characteristic of a Black friend. In the positive statement condition, the target wrote, "The best thing about Jamal is that he's extremely loyal. I feel like I can always count on that nigga." In the negative statement condition, the target wrote, "The bad thing about Jamal is that he's always distracting me. Whenever that nigga's around, I can't seem to get any work done" (see Supplemental Materials to view profiles). Participants then completed the *perceptions of the target's prejudice*, *inappropriateness*, and *negative affect*³ measures before answering demographic questions, and receiving debriefing and compensation.

Study 2 Results

To examine Black individuals' perceptions and affective responses to the target's use of the n-word, we conducted three separate 2 (statement valence condition: positive vs. negative) $\times$ 3 (target race: Black vs. biracial vs. White) between-subjects ANOVAs on each dependent variable (see Tables 5 and 6 for means, standard deviations, and full ANOVA results).

Across all measures, we found a consistent pattern of a main effect of the target race (all $ps < .001$). The White target was perceived as more prejudiced, inappropriate, and elicited more negative affect than both the Black (all $ps < .001$) and the biracial (all $ps < .001$) targets. Yet, across measures, there were no significant differences between the Black and biracial targets (all $ps > .999$; see Table 6). There was no significant main effect of statement valence (all $ps > .298$) or interaction (all $ps > .458$).

Table 5. Study 2 Means and Standard Deviations for Target Profiles.

Means and Standard Deviations Across Conditions												
Measures	Black				Biracial				White			
	Positive (n = 62)		Negative (n = 64)		Positive (n = 58)		Negative (n = 55)		Positive (n = 62)		Negative (n = 62)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Perceptions of target's prejudice	2.62	1.10	2.60	1.39	2.76	1.08	2.62	1.28	4.20	1.48	3.99	1.60
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	3.27	1.27	3.03	1.54	3.44	1.45	3.18	1.54	5.15	1.82	5.14	1.75
Negative affect	1.31	0.64	1.40	0.67	1.52	0.81	1.33	0.77	2.39	1.28	2.25	1.27
Measures	Black		Biracial		White		White		Positive		Negative	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Perceptions of target's prejudice	3.15	1.41	3.31	1.49	5.14	1.78	3.97	1.74	3.80	1.87		
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	5.77	1.04	6.20	0.98	6.16	0.95	5.82	1.08	6.27	0.88		
Negative affect	1.36	0.65	1.43	0.79	2.32	1.27	1.74	1.05	1.67	1.03		

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Table 6. Study 2 Between-Subjects ANOVA Results for Target Profiles.

Measures	ANOVA Results										
	Target Race Condition				Statement Valence Condition				Target Race × Statement Valence Condition		
	<i>F</i> (2, 357)	<i>p</i>	η^2_p	<i>F</i> (1, 357)	<i>p</i>	η^2_p	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95%CI	<i>d</i>	<i>F</i> (2, 357)	<i>p</i>
Perceptions of target's prejudice	47.69	<.001	.211	0.81	.368	.002	0.13 (0.14)	−0.15, 0.40	0.08	0.17	.843
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	60.97	<.001	.255	1.08	.299	.003	0.17 (0.17)	−0.15, 0.50	0.09	0.26	.773
Negative affect	39.67	<.001	.182	0.57	.451	.002	0.08 (0.10)	−0.12, 0.27	0.07	0.78	.459
Comparisons Between Target Race Conditions											
Measures	Black vs. Biracial				Black vs. White				Biracial vs. White		
	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>
Perceptions of target's prejudice	0.08 (0.17)	−0.34, 0.50	1.00	−0.07	1.48 (0.17)	1.08, 1.89	<.001	−1.06	1.41 (0.18)	0.99, 1.83	<.001
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	0.16 (0.20)	−0.33, 0.65	1.00	−0.11	1.99 (0.20)	1.51, 2.33	<.001	−1.24	1.83 (0.20)	1.34, 2.33	<.001
Negative affect	0.08 (0.12)	−0.22, 0.37	1.00	−0.11	0.97 (0.12)	0.68, 1.25	<.001	−0.96	0.89 (0.12)	0.60, 1.19	<.001

Note. *MD* = mean difference; *SE* = standard error.

Study 2 Discussion

Study 2 examined how the n-word valence (positive or negative) interacted with target race. Consistent with **H1**, the White target was seen as more prejudiced, inappropriate, and prompted more negative affect than the Black and biracial targets, regardless of valence. These findings highlight the persistent racialized nature of the slur and the contextual sensitivity of its usage for Black individuals, aligning with prior research (King et al., 2018) showing that n-word use by non-Black individuals is broadly unacceptable, irrespective of intent or context. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) helps explain these responses as defenses of ingroup boundaries; the White target's use of the n-word likely triggers threat, leading to negative perceptions and responses. Because the first two studies did not directly measure perceived intent, in Study 3, we directly tested the link between perceived ill intent and group membership.

Study 3

Although Black participants perceived Black and biracial targets similarly in Studies 1 and 2, the biracial target may not have elicited more negative responses because participants considered the target as a racial ingroup member, and thus did not perceive the biracial target as acting out of ill intent. However, we propose that if biracial individuals discount their Black identity, Black people may consider them less of an ingroup member. This change in ingroup status should result in greater perceived ill intent, and, in turn, more negative perceptions and responses to their use of the n-word. To test this possibility, we randomly assigned Black participants to read a profile of either a biracial-identified (like in Studies 1 and 2), a Black-identified, or a Black-disidentified biracial target. The target then described one positive and one negative characteristic of his Black coworker, with the n-word either included in the negative characteristic description or omitted. In the friendship context (Studies 1 and 2), participants may have been more inclined to give the benefit of the doubt and less likely to infer ill intent. Because the biracial target was judged leniently in the previous studies, Study 3 employed a coworker context to more stringently assess whether such leniency would persist in a less personal relationship.

In line with prior work on social cues shaping racial perceptions of biracial individuals (Cooley et al., 2018; Smith & Wout, 2019), we hypothesized that participants would perceive the Black-disidentified biracial target as less ingroup, more prejudiced, inappropriate, ill-intentioned, and eliciting greater negative affect than the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets (**H3**). Moreover, we predicted that target self-identification would be moderated by slur usage, such that in the no n-word condition, participants' responses would not differ, but in the n-word condition, the Black-disidentified target would be perceived more negatively than the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets.⁴

Study 3 also directly measured ill intent and group membership. Moreover, we conducted exploratory analyses to test whether group membership and perceived intent

mediated these effects. We expected the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets to be given the benefit of the doubt when using the n-word because their ingroup membership status should make it unlikely that they would have ill intent towards Black people, compared to the Black-disidentified target, who should be perceived as more of an outgroup member. This benefit of the doubt while using the n-word should lead to less negative perceptions and responses toward the Black-identified and biracial-identified targets. This study was preregistered on OSF: https://osf.io/67rkj/overview?view_only=3187242f94f646b8ab54637de0d7469e.

Method

Participants. This study had a 2 (slur usage: n-word vs. no n-word) $\times$ 3 (target self-identification: Black-identified vs. biracial-identified vs. Black-disidentified) between-subjects design. We recruited 490 self-identified Black American adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.65$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.38$; 52% women) from Prolific for this online study, compensating participants with \$1.40. We excluded participants who did not identify as monoracially Black ($n = 30$), incorrectly remembered information about the target person (race = 15, gender = 2), incorrectly remembered information about the coworker (race = 22, gender = 2), or failed the n-word attention check ($n = 37$). After these exclusions, we had a final sample of 392 participants. A sensitivity analysis using the ‘pwr’ package (Champely, 2017) in the R programming language indicated that this sample provided 80% power to detect a minimum effect size of Cohen’s $d = 0.34$ for condition effects, $2_p = .03$ for ANOVA main effects, and $2_p = .03$ for ANOVA interaction effects.

Procedure and Measures. Reliabilities and correlations for the outcome variables from Study 3 are in Table 7. Study 3 followed the same procedure as Studies 1 and 2, with three changes. First, Black participants were randomly assigned to read a profile written by a biracial target who either identified as “Half Black/Half White” (biracial-identified), “Half Black/Half White, but I see myself as Black” (Black-identified), or “Half Black/Half White, but I don’t see myself as Black” (Black-disidentified). Second, participants viewed the target’s profile, which described a Black coworker (an acquaintance, not a friend), highlighting one positive and one negative characteristic of the coworker. In the n-word condition, the target described the coworker negatively using the n-word (i.e., “A bad thing about Jamal is that he can be distracting. Whenever that nigga’s around, it’s hard to get any work done”). In the no n-word condition, the n-word was omitted (see Supplemental Materials to view profiles). Third, participants also completed two additional measures. Specifically, participants rated the degree (1 = *completely outgroup* to 7 = *completely ingroup*; 4 = *equally outgroup and Equally ingroup*) to which they consider the target person as a part of their racial ingroup (*Group membership*; one item; Ho et al., 2011), and the target’s perceived (1 = *extremely negative* to 7 = *extremely positive*) *ill intentions* towards Black people (one item reverse scored so that increasing scores indicate more perceived ill intent). Finally, participants completed an n-word attention check to

confirm whether they saw the n-word or not, were asked demographic questions, debriefed, and compensated.

Study 3 Results

To examine Black individuals' perceptions and affective responses to the target's use of the n-word, we conducted five separate 2 (slur usage: n-word vs. no n-word) $\times$ 3 (target self-identification: Black-identified vs. biracial-identified vs. Black-disidentified) between-subjects ANOVAs on each dependent variable (see Tables 8 and 9 for means, standard deviations, and full ANOVA results). A racial self-identification manipulation check for Study 3 (see Supplemental Materials) confirmed that participants perceived the Black-disidentified target as perceiving himself as less of a racial ingroup member than the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets.

Perceptions of the target's prejudice. Consistent with our preregistered hypotheses, there was a main effect of slur usage on perceived prejudice ($p < .001$), with participants rating the targets in the n-word conditions as more prejudiced than targets in the no n-word conditions. A main effect of target self-identification also emerged ($p < .001$): the Black-disidentified target was perceived as more prejudiced than both the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets (all $ps < .001$), who did not significantly differ from each other ($p = .100$). Within the n-word condition, the Black-disidentified target was again rated as more prejudiced than both the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets (all $ps < .001$), with no significant differences between the latter two targets ($p = .061$; see Table 9).

Perceptions of the target's inappropriateness. A main effect of slur usage emerged for perceived inappropriateness ($p < .001$), with participants rating the targets in the n-word conditions as more inappropriate than targets in the no n-word conditions. There was also a main effect of target self-identification ($p < .001$): participants rated the Black-disidentified target as more inappropriate than both the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets (all $ps < .001$) and rated the biracial-identified target as more inappropriate than the Black-identified target ($p = .003$). Within the n-word condition, the Black-disidentified target was rated as more inappropriate than the biracial-identified ($p = .002$) and Black-identified ($p < .001$) targets, with no significant difference between the latter two targets ($p = .067$; see Table 9).

Negative affect. A main effect of slur usage emerged ($p < .001$), indicating that targets who used the n-word elicited more negative affect than those in the no n-word condition. There was also a main effect of target self-identification ($p < .001$): participants rated the Black-disidentified target as eliciting more negative affect than the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets (all $ps < .001$), and the biracial-identified target was rated as eliciting more negative affect than the Black-identified target ($p = .021$). Additionally, a significant target self-identification by slur usage interaction emerged ($p = .001$). Targets differed significantly from each other in the no n-word, $F(2, 386) = 8.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .043$, and n-word, $F(2, 386) = 24.51$, $p < .001$,

$\eta_p^2 = .113$ conditions. Within the n-word condition, the Black-disidentified target evoked more negative affect than both the biracial-identified ($p = .011$) and Black-identified ($p < .001$) targets, and the biracial-identified target elicited more negative affect than the Black-identified target ($p < .001$; see Table 9).

Group membership. There was a significant main effect of target self-identification on perceived group membership ($p < .001$). Participants perceived the Black-disidentified target as less of a racial ingroup member than either the biracial-identified or the Black-identified targets (all $ps < .001$), while they perceived the Black-identified target as more of an ingroup member than the biracial-identified target ($p = .017$). Within the n-word condition, participants perceived the Black-disidentified target as less of an ingroup member than either the biracial-identified or the Black-identified targets (all $ps < .001$). No significant difference emerged between the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets ($p = .086$; see Table 9).

Perceived ill intent. A final 2×3 ANOVA on perceived ill intent revealed a main effect of slur usage ($p = .001$), such that participants perceived the targets who used the n-word as having more ill intent towards Black people than the targets in the no n-word condition. There was also a main effect of target self-identification ($p < .001$) such that participants perceived the Black-disidentified target as having more ill intent than either the biracial-identified or the Black-identified targets (all $ps < .001$), and they perceived the biracial-identified target as having more ill intent than the Black-identified target ($p < .007$). Within the n-word condition, these differences held (see Table 9).

Mediation Analyses. Finally, in three separate serial mediations, we tested whether the effect of the targets' racial self-identification on perceived prejudice, inappropriateness, and negative affect when the target used the n-word was serially mediated by ingroup membership and ill intent toward Black people. Specifically, because the Black-disidentified target who used the n-word was seen as more prejudiced and inappropriate and elicited more negative affect when they used the slur compared to the Black-identified and biracial-identified target, we tested if perceived ingroup membership of the target and their perceived ill intent toward Black people mediated this effect. We argue that the more participants perceive the biracial target as a racial ingroup member, the less they will assume that the target harbors ill intent towards Black people, and thus should have less negative perceptions and affect of the target's slur usage.

We used Model 6 of the Hayes Process Model in SPSS (Hayes, 2017) with 10,000 bootstraps to test our hypotheses. The following mediations were run only on participants who were exposed to the target using the n-word ($n = 198$), as this was the condition of interest (see Supplemental Materials for alternative moderated serial mediation models that include the slur condition as a moderator). Because there was no significant difference between the Black-identified and the biracial-identified targets on prejudice or inappropriateness when they used the slur⁵ ($ps \geq .06$), we collapsed these groups and coded the predictor variable (X) as Black-identified/biracial-identified = 0 and

Table 7. Measure Information and Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations for Study 3.

Measures	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceptions of target's prejudice	3.51 (1.71)	(.88)				
2. Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	3.65 (1.74)	.72***	(.88)			
3. Negative affect	1.55 (0.85)	.55***	.60***	(.93)		
4. Group membership	4.74 (1.83)	-.36***	-.34***	-.34***	(NA)	
5. Ill intent	3.46 (2.04)	.64***	.51***	.43***	-.43***	(NA)

Note. The reliability for each scale is shown on the diagonal.

*** $p < .001$.

Black-disidentified = 1. The primary dependent variables (Y) were perceived prejudice, inappropriateness, and negative affect. Group membership was the first mediator (M1), and ill intent (M2) was the second. These mediational analyses revealed that group membership and perceived ill intent toward Black people serially mediated the effect of target self-identification on perceived prejudice (*indirect effect*: $b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% $CI = [0.09, 0.33]$, *direct effect*: $b = 0.64$, $SE = 0.25$, 95% $CI = [0.15, 1.12]$, see Figure 4), inappropriateness (*indirect effect*: $b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% $CI = [0.06, 0.30]$, *direct effect*: $b = -0.04$, $SE = 0.29$, 95% $CI = [-0.61, 0.53]$, see Figure 5), and negative affect (*indirect effect*: $b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% $CI = [0.01, 0.16]$, *direct effect*: $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.17$, 95% $CI = [-0.30, 0.36]$, see Figure 6). Specifically, when controlling for the effect that group membership had through perceived ill intent on inappropriateness and negative affect, there was no longer a significant effect of target self-identification on inappropriateness and negative affect, and the effect was significantly reduced for perceived prejudice. Said another way, group membership and ill intent perceptions appeared to almost completely account for the more negative perceptions and affective responses of the Black-disidentified target compared to both the Black-identified and biracial-identified targets.

Study 3 Discussion

In Study 3, targets using the n-word were rated as more prejudiced, inappropriate, and ill-intentioned than targets who did not use the n-word. Furthermore, targets using the n-word elicited more negative affect. While Studies 1 and 2 showed no differences between the Black and biracial targets, Study 3 found that a biracial target who explicitly disidentified as Black (Black-disidentified) received more negative perceptions and responses than the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets, supporting **H3** and research on biracial people's racial fluidity (Sanchez et al., 2009; Smith & Wout, 2019). From a social identity theory perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), these findings underscore the role of ingroup identification in shaping perceptions and responses to individuals who use the n-word.

Table 8. Study 3 Means and Standard Deviations for Target Profiles.

Means and Standard Deviations Across Conditions												
Measures	Biracial-identified				Black-identified				Black-disidentified			
	No N-word (n = 54)		N-word (n = 76)		No N-word (n = 74)		N-word (n = 54)		No N-word (n = 66)		N-word (n = 68)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
	2.70	1.21	3.46	1.44	2.52	1.30	2.85	1.42	4.33	1.73	5.00	1.55
Perceptions of target's prejudice	2.93	1.11	4.20	1.80	2.30	1.12	3.59	1.68	3.74	1.58	5.04	1.51
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	1.07	0.17	1.84	1.07	1.15	0.35	1.25	0.51	1.59	0.76	2.21	1.01
Negative affect	4.94	1.56	4.82	1.94	5.47	1.72	5.48	1.36	4.36	1.66	3.47	1.79
Group membership	2.37	1.25	3.29	1.90	2.20	1.41	2.24	1.40	4.86	1.75	5.55	1.54
Ill intent												

Measures	Biracial-identified		Black-identified		Black-disidentified		No N-word		N-word	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
	3.14	1.40	2.66	1.36	4.67	1.67	3.19	1.65	3.82	1.71
	3.67	1.67	2.84	1.52	4.40	1.67	2.97	1.42	4.32	1.76
Perceptions of target's prejudice	1.52	0.91	1.19	0.43	1.90	0.95	1.28	0.55	1.81	1.00
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	4.87	1.78	5.48	1.57	3.91	1.78	4.95	1.72	4.54	1.92
Negative affect	2.91	1.71	2.22	1.40	5.18	1.67	3.15	1.93	3.76	2.11
Group membership										
Ill intent										

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Table 9. Study 3 Between-Subjects ANOVA Results for Target Profiles.

ANOVA Results										
Measures	Target self-identification condition			Slur usage condition			Target Self-Identification × Slur Usage Condition			
	<i>F</i> (2, 386)	<i>p</i>	η^2_p	<i>F</i> (1, 386)	<i>p</i>	η^2_p	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>d</i>	
										<i>p</i>
Perceptions of target's prejudice	67.49	<.001	.259	15.49	<.001	.039	0.58 (0.15)	0.29,0.88	−0.38	0.75
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	30.43	<.001	.136	70.88	<.001	.155	1.28 (0.15)	0.98,1.58	−0.85	0.01
Negative affect	28.64	<.001	.129	42.13	<.001	.098	0.50 (0.08)	0.35,0.65	−0.66	6.83
Group membership	27.80	<.001	.126	3.79	.052	.010	0.34 (0.17)	−0.00,0.68	0.23	2.66
Ill intent	127.62	<.001	.398	10.70	.001	.027	0.53 (0.16)	0.21,0.84	−0.30	2.53
										.081
										.013
Comparisons Between Target Self-Identification Conditions										
Measures	Biracial-identified vs. Black-identified			Biracial-identified vs. Black-disidentified			Black-identified vs. Black-disidentified			
	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Perceptions of target's prejudice	0.39 (0.18)	−0.05, 0.84	.100	0.35	1.58 (0.18)	<.001	−0.99	1.98 (0.18)	1.54, 2.41	<.001
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	0.62 (0.19)	0.17,1.07	.003	−0.52	0.82 (0.19)	<.001	−0.44	1.44 (0.19)	1.00,1.89	<.001
Negative affect	0.26 (0.10)	0.03,0.48	.021	0.46	0.44 (0.09)	<.001	−0.41	0.70 (0.09)	0.47,0.92	<.001
Group membership	0.60 (0.22)	0.08,1.11	.017	−0.36	0.96 (0.21)	<.001	0.54	1.56 (0.21)	1.05,2.07	<.001
Ill intent	0.61 (0.20)	0.13,1.09	.007	0.44	2.35 (0.20)	<.001	−1.34	2.95 (0.20)	2.48,3.23	<.001
										−1.92
Comparisons Between Target Self-Identification Conditions in the N-Word Statement Condition										
Measures	Biracial-identified vs. Black-identified			Biracial-identified vs. Black-disidentified			Black-identified vs. Black-disidentified			
	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>MD</i> (SE)	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Perceptions of target's prejudice	0.61 (0.26)	−0.02,1.23	.061	0.42	1.54 (0.24)	<.001	−1.03	2.15 (0.27)	1.51,2.79	<.001
Perceptions of target's inappropriateness	0.61 (0.27)	−0.03,1.25	.067	0.35	0.84 (0.25)	.002	−0.51	1.45 (0.27)	0.80,2.11	<.001
Negative affect	0.59 (0.13)	0.27,0.91	<.001	0.70	0.37 (0.13)	.011	−0.35	0.96 (0.14)	0.63,1.28	<.001
Group membership	0.67 (0.30)	−0.06,1.39	.086	−0.39	1.35 (0.28)	<.001	0.72	2.01 (0.31)	1.27,2.76	<.001
Ill intent	1.05 (0.28)	0.37,1.72	<.001	0.63	2.20 (0.26)	<.001	−1.27	3.25 (0.29)	2.55, 3.94	<.001
										−2.20

Note. MD = mean difference; SE = standard error.

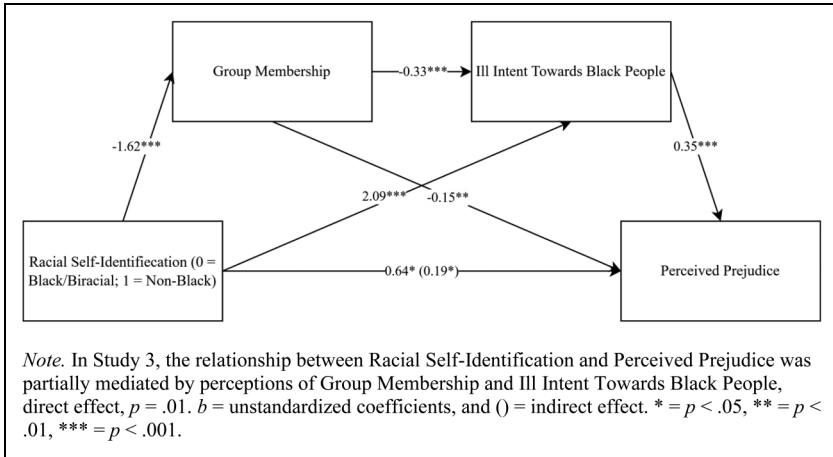


Figure 4. Serial mediation: Group membership and ill intent mediate the relationship between self-identification and perceived prejudice.

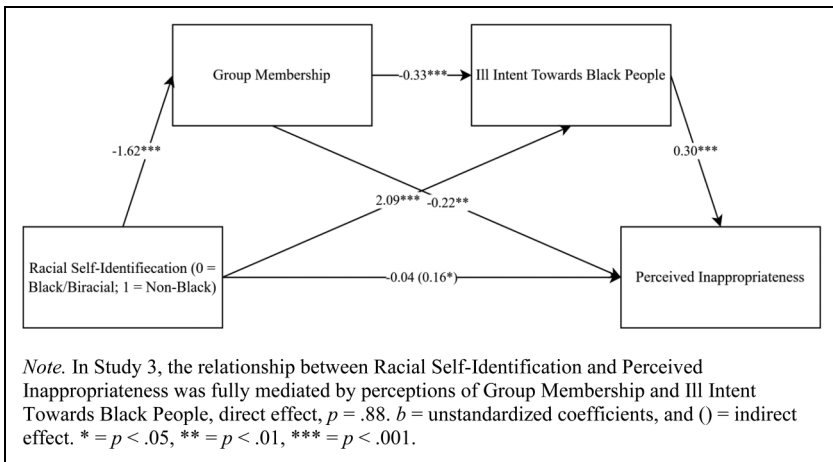


Figure 5. Serial mediation: Group membership and ill intent mediate the relationship between self-identification and perceived inappropriateness.

Mediation analyses revealed that the Black-disidentified target was perceived as less of a racial ingroup member, which led to greater perceived ill intent and negative perceptions and affect compared to the biracial-identified and Black-identified targets. These findings suggest that biracial individuals' racial self-identification can influence how Black people perceive and respond to their use of the n-word.

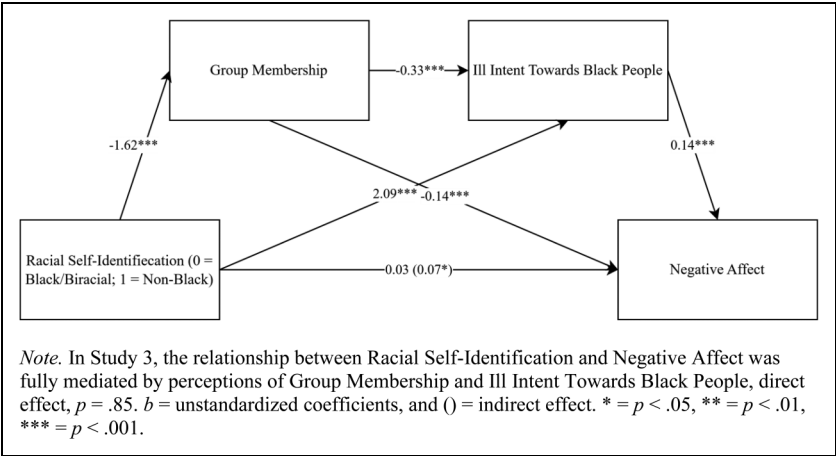


Figure 6. Serial mediation: Group membership and ill intent mediate the relationship between self-identification and negative affect.

General Discussion

The present research advances the limited literature on the n-word by exploring the implications of its use for Black people. Across three studies, this research—one of the few to examine how the n-word affects Black people using Black participants—found that when a White-identified target used the n-word, it evoked negative perceptions and responses from Black participants, regardless of context (H1). In contrast, Black and biracial targets generated minimal negative reactions and did not differ from each other (H2). Study 1 revealed that participants perceived the White target who used the n-word as more prejudiced and inappropriate than the Black or biracial target. Study 2 replicated this effect, showing that the White target consistently evoked the most negative reactions, regardless of valence. No significant differences emerged between Black and biracial targets, consistent with findings that Black people perceive Black and biracial people as racial ingroup members (Studies 1 and 2; Ho et al., 2017; Smith & Wout, 2019; Barnett & Wout, 2016). These results align with evidence that slurs are perceived as less offensive when used by ingroup members (Puchala et al., 2025; Sturaro et al., 2023), suggesting similar perceptions of acceptability.

The absence of statement valence effects in Study 2 indicates that *who* uses the n-word matters more than *how* it is used. Even in positive contexts, such as referring to a friend, White users elicited negative reactions from Black participants. Thus, despite positive intent, White people who use the n-word are still perceived more negatively by Black perceivers, suggesting they should refrain from such use if they wish to maintain positive relationships with Black people.

Moreover, in Study 3, a biracial target who disavowed his Blackness (Black-disidentified) was perceived as more prejudiced, inappropriate, and elicited

more negative affect than both the biracial-identified and Black-identified biracial targets (**H3**). This was due to reduced perceived racial ingroup membership, which increased perceived ill intent towards Black people. Thus, when biracial individuals identify explicitly as not Black, Black people may believe they are, in turn, denouncing their Blackness and should not use the n-word (Leverette, 2009; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003; Thornton, 2009). Indeed, when biracial individuals explicitly disidentified with their Black identity, they were viewed as less of an ingroup member and elicited more negative responses when they used the n-word.

The use of the n-word can also have psychological and physiological consequences (Osbourne et al., 2023). Although White users often deny prejudice in their intent (Cabrera & Hill-Zuganelli, 2021), Black participants perceived such use as prejudiced, inappropriate, and affectively negative. These perceptions can harm Black people's mental and physical health, contributing to psychological distress (Pieterse et al., 2012) and cardiovascular reactivity (Armstead et al., 1989). To address these issues, schools and workplaces should promote racial empathy and provide education about the n-word's historical and social implications (Cabrera et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2017).

Language Matters

The debate persists over whether White people's use of the n-word is inherently prejudiced (Asim, 2007; Cabrera & Hill-Zuganelli, 2021; King et al., 2018). Some argue that its linguistic evolution (i.e., n*gger to n*gga) reflects reduced racial animosity (Cabrera & Hill-Zuganelli, 2021; Harkness, 2017; Kennedy, 2002), and research suggests reclaimed derogatory terms (e.g., queer, bitch) can be viewed as less derogatory and more empowering when used by marginalized groups (Galinsky et al., 2013). However, others assert that White people's use of the n-word signals prejudice due to its historical role in maintaining social hierarchies (Adegbenbo & MacQuarrie, 2017; King et al., 2018). Our findings support the latter perspective: Black participants consistently perceived the White target's use of the n-word as prejudiced, regardless of context (e.g., when using it positively and discussing a Black friend).

Aligned with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), perceptions of slur usage were shaped by perceived group membership. In Studies 1 and 2, biracial targets elicited similar responses as Black targets, likely because participants assumed racial ingroup membership and extended the benefit of the doubt. However, in Study 3, when a biracial target explicitly disidentified with Blackness, he was perceived as less of an ingroup member, eliciting greater perceived ill intent and more negative responses. These findings underscore the flexibility of social identity-based judgments and demonstrate how racial self-identification can influence responses to slur use.

Critically, the consequences of using racial slurs extend beyond interpersonal judgments. Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985) found that when a White confederate used the n-word toward a Black target in professional settings, White third-party observers perceived the targeted individual more negatively. Similarly, in Study 1, all targets (Black, biracial, and White) were perceived more negatively when they used the n-word,

highlighting how slur usage can reinforce stereotypes and reduce perceived competence. Given the n-word's persistence in society, understanding its impact on Black individuals is critical for addressing ongoing bigotry and improving intergroup dynamics.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the present studies provide insight into the implications of the n-word on Black people, several limitations remain. All studies used an online context, which may have limited ecological validity; however, people frequently form impressions of others online based on minimal information, influencing perceptions and behaviors (Bacev-Giles & Haji, 2017). Moreover, in Study 2, we cautiously operationalized the "negative" condition to minimize participant harm, making it moderately more offensive than the positive condition. Although this approach limits generalization to more explicit uses, the Pilot Study indicated that the manipulation was effective. The lack of valence effects likely reflects Black people's tendency to perceive ingroup slur use as non-malicious, indicating that user race outweighs contextual valence. Additionally, because all the targets were men, future work should examine gender differences. Male biracial individuals are more strongly categorized via hypodescent (Young et al., 2021), so a biracial woman may be perceived as less of an ingroup member and more likely to be judged as prejudiced when using the n-word. Gendered speech norms may also matter, as women are expected to be warm and affiliative; violating this may amplify perceived offense (Eagly & Wood, 1982; Sutherland et al., 2015).

We also did not examine phenotype, though prior research shows that racial phenotypicity (e.g., facial features and skin tone) influences social categorization (Ho et al., 2011; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008). Future research should explore how phenotype, group membership, and social cues interact in shaping perceptions of n-word usage, such as by varying the biracial target's skin tone. Furthermore, examining other biracial groups, particularly dual minority biracial individuals (e.g., Black-Latine), could provide insight into whether having multiple marginalized identities reduces negative reactions to their use of the n-word. Finally, some White individuals may believe their use of the n-word is acceptable in certain contexts, such as having Black friends or singing along to a song. However, supplemental findings indicate that even a White target with all Black friends who used the n-word was still perceived negatively by Black participants (see Supplemental Materials).

Conclusion

The n-word, historically linked to anti-Black violence, remains one of the most offensive racial slurs. Despite reclamation efforts, its use by racial outgroup members continues to evoke perceptions of prejudice. This research highlights how racial group membership powerfully shapes Black individuals' judgments of n-word use, advancing social identity theory and the understanding of racial fluidity. Certain identifications and categorizations make some behaviors more socially acceptable than others. Understanding these dynamics can strengthen interracial relationships, as White

individuals should consider how their use of the word affects Black people. This work highlights that further discussion is needed on the word's effect on Black communities and its role in racial tensions and coalition-building.

ORCID iDs

Sheba M. Aikawa  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8330-9734>

Andre' Oliver  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0359-9632>

Daryl A. Wout  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6092-2670>

Ethical Approval

The IRB Ethics Review Committee at University of Colorado Boulder approved our studies (approval: 24-0551) on September 16, 2024. Respondents gave online consent for before starting the survey.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The corresponding author received financial support from the Psi Chi Mamie Phipps Clark Diversity Research Grant and NYU's Graduate Student Research Award for the research in this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The data and materials supporting the findings of this manuscript are available on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/yhzvm/overview?view_only=34a74aae0e3b45959e0d615bcb7f09b

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Prior to conducting the analyses, we ran an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with a Varimax rotation in SPSS on the 10 items associated with the negative affect subscale of the PANAS scale (i.e., distressed, guilty, scared, hostile, irritable, nervous, jittery, afraid, upset, ashamed). This analysis revealed a two-factor model (i.e., eigenvalues > 1), with the items distressed, hostile, irritable, and upset all loading above .6 on the first factor (eigenvalue = 5.26, which explained 52.60% of the variance in the model) and the items guilty, scared, jittery, and afraid all loading above .6 on the second factor (eigenvalue = 1.15, which explained 11.26% of the variance in the model). Based on this factor analysis, we averaged participants' responses to "distressed," "hostile," "irritable," and "upset" to create a negative affect measure ($\alpha = .87$).

Notably, there were no significant effects of our second factor for all conditions (all $ps < .193$; see Supplemental Materials).

2. We conducted a Pilot Study to test the manipulation of our valence statements in Study 2. 133 Black participants rated (1 = *extremely negative* to 7 = *extremely positive*) five positive or five negative statements, including the positive and negative n-word statements used in Study 2 (target race was omitted). The n-word in the negative statement was rated more negatively than in the positive statement ($p < .001$). The negative statement ($M = 2.05$) fell significantly below the midpoint (4 = *equally positive and negative*), while the positive statement ($M = 3.99$) did not. As expected, both n-word statements were rated more negatively than the filler statements without the word (all $ps < .001$).
3. Prior to conducting the analyses, we ran a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with a Varimax rotation in SPSS on the 4 PANAS items from Study 1 (i.e., distressed, hostile, irritable, upset). In addition, we included 2 more items (angry, frustrated) that we felt would load with the previous 4 items. This analysis revealed a single-factor model (i.e., eigenvalues > 1), with the items distressed, hostile, irritable, upset, angry, and frustrated all loading above .6 on the first factor (eigenvalue = 4.59, which explained 76.45% of the variance in the model), confirming our EFA in Study 1. Based on this factor analysis, we averaged participants' responses to "distressed," "hostile," "irritable," "upset," "angry," and "frustrated" to create a negative affect measure ($\alpha = .94$).
4. Contrary to our pre-registered hypothesis, we only found this significant slur usage by target self-identification interaction for negative affect. Moreover, we did find significant target self-identification differences in the no n-word statement condition. We report these findings in Supplemental Materials.
5. Although there was a significant difference between the Black and biracial-identified targets on negative affect when they used the slur, we report in the main text the mediation analyses with these groups collapsed because: (1) the results remained significant when repeating the analyses entering the biracial-identified target as 0 and the Black-disidentified target as 1 and (2) keeping the Black-identified target group maintained a fully powered mediational design.

References

- Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. A. (1988). Comments on the motivational status of self-esteem in social identity and intergroup discrimination. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 18*(4), 317–334. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2420180403>
- Abrams, D., & Hogg, M. A. (1990). An introduction to the social identity approach. In D. Abrams & M. Hogg (Eds.), *Social identity theory: Constructive and critical advances* (pp. 1–9). Springer-Verlag.
- Adegbebo, B. F., & MacQuarrie, C. (2017). The word nigger as racialized and non-racialized: A Foucauldian discourse analysis on the n-word in a Canadian society. *Journal of Undergraduate Ethnic Minority Psychology, 3*, 16–24.
- Andrews, K. (2014). From the 'bad nigger' to the 'good nigga': An unintended legacy of the Black Power movement. *Race & Class, 55*(3), 22–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396813508268>
- Armstead, C. A., Lawler, K. A., Gorden, G., Cross, J., & Gibbons, J. (1989). Relationship of racial stressors to blood pressure responses and anger expression in black college students. *Health Psychology, 8*(5), 541. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-6133.8.5.541>

- Asim, J. (2007). *The N-word : who can say it, who shouldn't, and why / Jabari Asim*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Bacev-Giles, C., & Haji, R. (2017). Online first impressions: Person perception in social media profiles. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 75, 50–57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.04.056>
- Barnett, S., & Wout, D. A. (2016). The racial ties that bind: Blacks' affective and behavioral responses to Black–White biracials acting stereotypically. In J. Sullivan & W. Cross (Eds.), *Meaning-making, internalized racism, and African American identity* (pp. 31–46). SUNY Press.
- Bolinger, R. J. (2017). The pragmatics of slurs. *Noûs*, 51(3), 439–462. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12090>
- Cabrera, N. L. (2019). *White guys on campus: Racism, White immunity, and the myth of "post-racial" higher education*. Rutgers University Press.
- Cabrera, N. L., & Hill-Zuganelli, D. (2021). "If lil' wayne can say it, why can't I?": White male undergraduates using the N-word. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 92(5), 680–703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2021.1889942>
- Champely, S., Ekstrom, C., Dalgaard, P., Gill, J., Weibelzahl, S., Anandkumar, A., Ford, C., Volcic, R., & De Rosario, H. (Developers). (2017). pwr: Basic functions for power analysis [Software]. <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/pwr/>
- Cooley, E., Brown-Iannuzzi, J. L., Agboh, D., Enjaian, B., Geyer, R., Lue, N., & Wu, S. (2018). The fluid perception of racial identity: The role of friendship groups. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 9(1), 32–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617703171>
- Croom, A. M. (2013). How to do things with slurs: Studies in the way of derogatory words. *Language & Communication*, 33(3), 177–204. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2013.03.008>
- Davis, F. J. (1991). *Who is black?: One nation's definition*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (1982). Inferred sex differences in status as a determinant of gender stereotypes about social influence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43(5), 915. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.43.5.915>
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A. G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G* Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, 39(2), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193146>
- Franco, M., Holmes, O. L., Swafford, F., Krueger, N., & Rice, K. (2019). Black people's racial identity and their acceptance of Black-White multiracial people. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 22(8), 1181–1195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430218820957>
- Gaither, S. E., Pauker, K., Slepian, M. L., & Sommers, S. R. (2016). Social belonging motivates categorization of racially ambiguous faces. *Social Cognition*, 34(2), 97–118. <https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2016.34.2.97>
- Galinsky, A. D., Wang, C. S., Whitson, J. A., Anicich, E. M., Hugenberg, K., & Bodenhausen, G. V. (2013). The reappropriation of stigmatizing labels. *Psychological Science*, 24(10), 2020–2029. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613482943>
- Gibson, J. L., Epstein, L., & Magarian, G. P. (2020). Taming uncivil discourse. *Political Psychology*, 41(2), 383–401. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12626>
- Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1985). The effect of an overheard ethnic slur on evaluations of the target: How to spread a social disease. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 21(1), 61–72. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(85\)90006-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(85)90006-X)

- Güvendir, E. (2015). Why are males inclined to use strong swear words more than females? An evolutionary explanation based on male intergroup aggressiveness. *Language Sciences*, 50, 133–139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2015.02.003>
- Harkness, G. (2017). Nigger may be the most controversial word in the history of the English. In *Getting real about race: Hoodies, mascots, model minorities, and other conversations* (pp. 283–295). Temple University Press.
- Hayes, A. F. (2017). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Hess, L. (2021). Slurs and expressive commitments. *Acta Analytica*, 36(2), 263–290. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-020-00445-x>
- Hilton, J. L., & Von Hippel, W. (1996). Stereotypes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 47(1), 237–271. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.47.1.237>
- Ho, A. K., Kteily, N., & Chen, J. M. (2017). “You’re one of us”: Black Americans’ use of hypodescent and its association with egalitarianism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 113(5), 753–768. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000107>
- Ho, A. K., Sidanius, J., Levin, D. T., & Banaji, M. R. (2011). Evidence for hypodescent and racial hierarchy in the categorization and perception of biracial individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(3), 492–506. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021562>
- Hornsey, M. J., Oppes, T., & Svensson, A. (2002). “It’s OK if we say it, but you can’t”: Responses to intergroup and intragroup criticism. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 32(3), 293–307. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.90>
- Hudson, S. T. J., Kurdi, B., Lai, C. K., Johnson, J., & Banaji, M. R. (2024). Implicit attitudes evoked by a singular American slur: Five experiments on *N****er* and *N****a* in samples of Black and White Americans. *Social Cognition*, 42(3), 161–197. <https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2024.42.3.161>
- Jay, T., & Janschewitz, K. (2008). The pragmatics of swearing. *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behavior, Culture*, 4(2), 267–328. <https://doi.org/10.1515/JPLR.2008.013>
- Kennedy, R. (2002). *Nigger: the strange career of a troublesome word*. Pantheon Books.
- King, W., Emanuel, R., Brown, X., Dingle, N., Lucas, V., Perkins, A., Turner, A., Whittington, D., & Witherspoon, Q. D. (2018). Who has the “right” to use the n-word? A survey of attitudes about the acceptability of using the n-word and its derivatives. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, 6(2), 47–58.
- Leverette, T. (2009). Speaking up. *Journal of Black Studies*, 39(3), 434–445. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934706297875>
- Messick, D. M., & Mackie, D. M. (1989). Intergroup relations. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 40(1), 45–81. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ps.40.020189.000401>
- O’Dea, C. J., Miller, S. S., Andres, E. B., Ray, M. H., Till, D. F., & Saucier, D. A. (2015). Out of bounds: Factors affecting the perceived offensiveness of racial slurs. *Language Sciences*, 52, 155–164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2014.09.005>
- O’Dea, C. J., Smith, B. N., & Saucier, D. A. (2021). Referencing race = racist? Examining perceptions of references to a target’s race as offensive. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 40(4), 459–481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X20969744>

- Oliver, A., Tracy, R. E., Young, S. G., & Wout, D. A. (2024). Black + White = Prototypically Black: Visualizing Black and White people's mental representations of Black–White biracial people. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 50(7), 1113–1127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231164026>
- Osbourne, L., Barnett, J., & Blackwood, L. (2023). Black students' experiences of “acceptable” racism at a UK university. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 33(1), 43–55. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2637>
- Patton, L. D., Haynes, C. M., Stewart, S., & Ivery, S. M. (2017). Enhancing classroom learning environments for students of color. In J. F. L. Jackson, L. J. Charleston, & C. K. Gilbert (Eds.), *Advancing equity and diversity in student affairs* (pp. 149–164). Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Pauker, K., Williams, A., & Steele, J. R. (2016). Children's racial categorization in context. *Child Development Perspectives*, 10(1), 33–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12155>
- Peery, D., & Bodenhausen, G. V. (2008). Black + White = Black. *Psychological Science*, 19(10), 973–977. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02185.x>
- Pieterse, A. L., Todd, N. R., Neville, H. A., & Carter, R. T. (2012). Perceived racism and mental health among Black American adults: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 59(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026208>
- Price, S. (2011). Straight talk about the N-word. *Teaching Tolerance*, 40, 46–48.
- Puchała, D., Bilewicz, M., & Świdarska, A. (2025). Reclaiming derogatory language: Self-reports and interbeat intervals. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 44(1), 38–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X241299791>
- Rahman, J. (2012). The N word. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 40(2), 137–171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0075424211414807>
- Rappaport, J. (2019). Communicating with slurs. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 69(277), 795–816. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqz022>
- Rockquomore, K. A., & Laszloffy, T. A. (2003). Multiple realities: A relational narrative approach in therapy with black–white mixed-race clients. *Family Relations*, 52(2), 119–128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00119.x>
- Sanchez, D. T., Shih, M., & Garcia, J. A. (2009). Juggling multiple racial identities: Malleable racial identification and psychological well-being. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15(3), 243–254. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014373>
- Smith II, R. E., & Wout, D. A. (2019). Blacks' perception of a biracials ingroup membership shapes attributions to discrimination following social rejection. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 25(4), 483–493. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000267>
- Sturaro, S., Suitner, C., & Fasoli, F. (2023). When is self-labeling seen as reclaiming? The role of user and observer's sexual orientation in processing homophobic and category labels' use. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 42(4), 464–475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X231173147>
- Sutherland, C. A., Young, A. W., Mootz, C. A., & Oldmeadow, J. A. (2015). Face gender and stereotypicality influence facial trait evaluation: Counter-stereotypical female faces are negatively evaluated. *British Journal of Psychology*, 106(2), 186–208. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12085>

- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks-Cole.
- Thornton, M. C. (2009). Policing the borderlands: White and Black American newspaper perceptions of multiracial heritage and the idea of race, 1996–2006. *Journal of Social Issues*, 65(1), 105–127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.01590.x>
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(6), 1063. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.6.1063>
- Wout, D. A., Oliver, A., Smith, R. E. II, & Barnett, S. (2025). Safety at the boundaries of race: Black people derive identity safety from Black–White biracial people. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000757>
- Young, D. M., Sanchez, D. T., Pauker, K., & Gaither, S. E. (2021). A meta-analytic review of hypodescent patterns in categorizing multiracial and racially ambiguous targets. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 47(5), 705–727. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220941321>
- Young, D. M., Sanchez, D. T., & Wilton, L. S. (2013). At the crossroads of race: Racial ambiguity and biracial identification influence psychological essentialist thinking. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 19(4), 461–467. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032565>

Author Biographies

Sheba M. Aikawa, MA, is a Social Psychology PhD Candidate at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Andre’ Oliver, PhD, is a Post Doctoral Associate at Rutgers University (New Brunswick).

Daryl A. Wout is an Associate Professor of Psychology at John Jay College, City University of New York.