# Taming Uncivil Discourse

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*In an era of seemingly intense populist politics, a variety of issues of intergroup prejudice, discrimination, and conflict have moved center stage in much of the industrialized world. Among these is "political correctness" and, in particular, what constitutes a legitimate discourse of political and social conflict and opposition. Yet the meaning of legitimate discourse is being turned on its head as some disparaged groups seek to reclaim, or reappropriate, slurs directed against them. Using as a context a U.S. Supreme Court case about whether "The Slants"—a band named after a traditional slur against Asians—can trademark its name, we test several hypotheses about reappropriation processes based on a nationally representative sample with an oversample of East Asian Americans and several survey experiments. We find that motives attributions influence how people understand and evaluate potentially disparaging words. In particular, when reappropriation motives are perceived, insulting words are judged to be less insulting. In this sense, uncivil discourse can to some degree be tamed.*

**KEY WORDS:** intergroup conflict, incivility, reappropriation, racial slurs, hate speech, dehumanization

Intergroup conflict shows few signs of abating in this era of apparently growing and intensifying populism in the United States and much of the industrialized world.[1] Perhaps driven by the realization that many if not most conflicts—including symbolic conflicts—are perceived to be zero-sum in nature, the traditional norms favoring heterogeneous, cross-cutting political coalitions have often been swallowed up by polarization and its echo chambers (e.g., Mutz, 2015).

Central to the ways in which groups contest nonviolently for power and resources are argumentation and speech. Much of the debate surrounding intergroup conflict (e.g., over hate speech) is reasoned and reasonable. But throughout history, groups have found it advantageous to attempt to marginalize their opponents with disparaging names and slurs. To the extent that one can delegitimize

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[1] For an excellent (and already widely cited) account of the rise of populism in the world, see Inglehart and Norris (2016). These authors trace the rise of populism in Europe and elsewhere and provide both macrolevel and microlevel analyses of the variability in the success of populist movements.

one's enemies, it becomes unnecessary to rebut their arguments. Name-calling is certainly not new in politics (e.g., Geer, 2006), but concerns that entirely free speech is too costly are becoming ever more commonplace and vocal (e.g., Bezanson, 2012).

One common defense against uncivil discourse is to ban unwanted speech. From Holocaust denial laws in Europe to the various exceptions carved out by the U.S. Supreme Court from that country's First Amendment (e.g., "fighting words"), governments frequently seek to restrict the entry of certain words and ideas into the marketplace of ideas. "Group libel" laws, often mobilized in community-based free-speech controversies (e.g., the neo-Nazi attempt to march in Skokie, Illinois—see Gibson & Bingham, 1985), exemplify attempts by governments to protect certain groups from the harms of rough speech during intense political struggles.

A second defense actively pursued is "reappropriation," which is "the process of taking possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce a stigmatized group's lesser status" (Galinsky et al., 2013, p. 2020, citations omitted). Under this theory, the targeted group takes "ownership" of a disparaging term—for example, when blacks "add a positive meaning to *nigger*," gays transform *queer* into a badge of pride, and Asian Americans throw the slur *slants* "back in their oppressors' face" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 48).[2] The idea of reappropriation is not new; indeed, some trace modern-day use of the technique to Dick Gregory's 1964 autobiography *Nigger*. What does seem to be new is the increasing frequency with which historically underrepresented minorities are adopting reclamation as a means of reasserting their identities and attempting to disarm prejudice and discrimination.

Of late, serious social scientific inquiries have investigated the processes and power of reappropriation under the general hypothesis that "self-labeling with a derogatory group label may ironically weaken its stigmatizing force and even revalue it, transforming the very words designed to demean into expressions of self-respect" (Galinsky et al., 2013, p. 2020). To some scholars, derogatory terms serve only to reinforce stereotypes (e.g., Brochu & Esses, 2011), regardless of the speakers and their motives. To others, however, taking "ownership" of slurs can neutralize them and so can both empower the targeted group and prompt outsiders to evaluate the group more positively (Bianchi, 2014; Galinsky et al., 2013). On this account, "the reappropriation of slurs is not a mere exercise in linguistic gymnastics; rather, it is a potent strategy of identity creation and maintenance" (Anten, 2006, p. 434)—a strategy that may be capable of restructuring and redefining intergroup conflict to at least some degree and under some circumstances.

To date, however, little rigorous empirical evidence allows the drawing of firm conclusions about whether reappropriation has its desired effects. While it may be obvious that those who reappropriate the offensive slur disarm it *for themselves*, it is not clear how those efforts affect third-party observers, whether they are members of the stigmatized group or not. Moreover, processes of reappropriation almost certainly reflect strong contextual influences. Most generally, perceived motives undoubtedly matter. As a practical matter, slurs exchanged by comembers of a stigmatized group differ from slurs issued by one group against another. Unfortunately, only scant progress has been made in identifying the contextual factors that help transform slurs from insults to assertions of group empowerment.

Fortunately, a real-world political struggle involving reappropriation has recently emerged, resulting in an important free speech ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court. The conflict involves the effort by an Asian-American band to trademark its name. Trademark issues do not normally attract much attention from political psychologists (although see the dispute over whether the capital's football team, the "Washington Redskins," should continue using its name[3]), but the band, "The Slants," spe-

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[2]See also Foucault (1978, p. 101) who, 40 years ago, coined the phrase "reverse discourse" to refer to this process of reappropriation. Reappropriation is a tactic groups have used throughout history, even if the term "reappropriation" seems to be relatively new, and the scientific study of reappropriation processes is certainly relatively new. For useful discussions of reappropriation processes, see Nelson (2001) and Tirrell (1993).
[3]See Cox, Clement, and Vargas (2016).

cifically and explicitly selected its name in an effort at reappropriation. Dismissing this motive, the U.S. government denied the band's request to trademark its name, insisting that the band's name disparaged Asian Americans. The case involves some interesting legal issues (see Anten, 2006; Magarian, Epstein, & Gibson, 2019), but, from our perspective, it offers the chance for a realistic case study of how reappropriation actually influences both members of the disparaged group and bystanders—those not subject to the insulting words.

The purpose of this research is to test several hypotheses related to the process of reappropriation, using "The Slants" controversy as our general context. Based on a survey of a representative sample of the American population, our analysis examines how people who are not members of a minority group evaluate reappropriation. Supplementing this sample with an oversample of Americans of Asian ancestry, we also gauge the reactions of these Asian Americans to the band's effort at reappropriation. To do so, we apply an experiment to both samples in which the identity of the group using the name "The Slants" is varied between a fully Asian band and a fully non-Asian band, under the hypothesis that the ancestry of the band members affects attributions of the motives of the group in adopting the name and consequently affects judgments about how disparaging "slants" is to those of Asian ancestry. We conclude that the success of reappropriation depends upon the context of the speech. These findings may have important implications for intergroup relations in politics, a topic we address next.

## The Role of Words in Intergroup Relations

Our study assumes that words matter. But, to put it bluntly, do they? Do words really have much to do with the nature of intergroup conflict?

At the extreme, some research suggests that dehumanizing slurs are an important component of genocides. Often cited is the case of Rwanda, where evidence suggests that the radio station Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) (a/k/a "Radio Machete") used words to incite Hutus to kill Tutsis. As Yanagizawa-Drott (2014) explains: "The appeal to emotions and the fostering of hate through methods such as the use of dehumanizing language, describing Tutsis as cockroaches, could thus play an independent or complementary role by influencing intrinsic motivation for violence" (p. 1956).

After the Zulu king in South Africa referred to African immigrants as "lice" in April 2015, violence broke out against immigrants in KwaZulu Natal and elsewhere (Hall, 2015). Similar claims have been made about nationalism and intergroup hatred in Croatia (e.g., Della Vigna, Enikolopov, Mironova, Petrova, & Zhuravskaya, 2014). As our last example, Horowitz (2003, p. 91) discusses instances (e.g., Sri Lanka) in which leaders used inflammatory language toward an outgroup, quickly followed by widespread violence against that group. In all these contexts, words seemed to matter.

Particular kinds of words seem to be especially pernicious: Dehumanizing one's opponents may contribute to discrimination, aggression, and violence toward the dehumanized group. In just one illustration from a substantial literature: Those who dehumanize Turkish people tend to oppose allowing Turkey to join the European Union (Pereira, Vala, & Leyens, 2009). Using slurs also can be an effective way to dehumanize one's opponents, as in referring to Arabs and Roma as "mongrels," "animals," and "pests" (Verseck, 2013). References (both words and gestures) to Asian people as "slant-eyes"—as at the 2017 Major League Baseball World Series and many other sporting events throughout the world (Levin, 2017)—are also examples of using slurs to belittle and degrade one's opponents in an attempt to silence them and keep them in their place.

We should be clear that we do not assert that reappropriation *necessarily* reduces intergroup animosity and therefore significantly affects the chances of group-based violence. At the macrolevel, many factors beyond mere words are undoubtedly important. A simple *premise* of our research, however, is that how groups refer to one another—with respect or with disrespect[4]—has something to do

[4]See, for examples, Simon and Grabow (2014); Honneth (1995); and Huo, Binning, and Molina (2010).

with the intensity of intergroup conflict. A *hypothesis* of our research is that reappropriation is a means by which insults can be disarmed. More specifically, we expect that when the motives of speakers are perceived to be those of seeking to reclaim and neutralize an insulting term, the use of the term will be judged to be less disparaging. If insults no longer insult, perhaps the structure of intergroup conflict is changed. Fortunately, some earlier research on processes of reappropriation exists and can guide our own analysis. Before turning to that literature, we set the stage with the actual controversy that motivates our study.

## The Context: *Matal v. Tam*

In 2017, the U.S. Supreme Court decided *Matal v. Tam*, one of the most interesting and potentially important First Amendment cases in recent years.[5] Simon Shiao Tam, an Asian American, is the founder and leader of a band called "The Slants." Tam's goal in forming the band was not only to play music; he also saw it as a medium to express his concern with discrimination against Asian Americans. For this reason, he hired Asian-American band members and decided to call the band "The Slants." Adopting this name was his way of transforming an insulting term into a "badge of pride." In Tam's words: "We want to take on these stereotypes that people have about us, like the slanted eyes, and own them."[6]

In 2011, Tam filed an application to register "The Slants" as a trademark. Under a section of a U.S. federal law (the Lanham Act), the Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) is supposed to refuse to register trademarks that "disparage … persons, living or dead, institutions, beliefs, or national symbols." Believing that "The Slants" refers to and disparages "persons of Asian ancestry," the PTO refused registration.

Tam appealed the PTO's decision, claiming, first, that the term "The Slants" is not disparaging—at least not in the way the band used it. To Tam, the PTO failed to consider the context of the speech, which was the opposite of disparaging; it was, he said, an attempt at reclamation or reappropriation. Second, Tam argued that the "disparagement" clause of the Lanham Act violates the First Amendment because the clause discriminates on the basis of viewpoint: It unjustifiably permits favored but not disfavored messages. In the spring of 2017, the Court ruled in favor of Tam and the band got its sought-after trademark.

## Theories of Reappropriation

Social and political psychologists have focused specifically on claims that derogatory or hateful speech does not always function as such by investigating the hypothesis that the type of relationship between the perpetrator and the target has much to do with how listeners assess possibly disparaging remarks. Whether the relationship is congruent with prototypical expectations is especially crucial. "Most often, this entails a person with more power acting against a person or group with less power" (Cunningham, Ferreira, & Fink, 2009, p. 60). Scholars recognize, however, that nonprototypical relationships may change the interpretation of nominally disparaging comments. More generally, psychologists seem to agree that "the prototypicality of a form of prejudice is highly dependent on

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[5]For commentary on the importance of *Tam* see Calvert (2017, p. 25). For analysis of the free speech issues in the case see Magarian, Epstein, and Gibson (2019).

[6]The use of the disparaging term "slant-eye" originated in World War II: As Kang (1997) explains, "During World War II and thereafter, the media…reinforced the view that possessing Asian features was not only 'un-American' but simply not normal. In 1944, Hollywood produced a series of war films deriding Japanese racial features. These films contained cartoon characters such as Bugs Bunny. In Bugs Nips the Nips, Bugs mocks and abuses Japanese soldiers whom he calls 'slant-eYes.' [sic] The soldiers are drawn with buck teeth and painted yellow. This ugly caricature of Asian physical features did not stop [after] World War II" (p. 330).

the social/historical context" (Marti, Bobier, & Baron, 2000, p. 405) and that "the threshold appears to be higher for perceiving nonprototypical forms of prejudice" (Marti et al., 2000, p. 415).

But there is more to contexts than simply membership (or not) in the disparaged group. Motives matter. Because some observers may assume that a member of the disparaged group would not make disparaging comments about her or his own group (Cunningham et al., 2009, p. 61), they conclude that seeming slurs must not have been *intended to be* disparaging. Just as in so many areas of law (e.g., criminal assault, hate crimes), perceived intentions provide a context for interpreting actions. Thus, we posit interconnections among nominal group membership, motives for speaking, and assessments of the speech. We also hypothesize that attributes of the listeners (i.e., bystanders) influence how speech is assessed. The most obvious such attribute is whether the bystanders are comembers of the minority group.

In addition, we expect a major influence on reappropriation of more general attitudes or personality attributes concerning the desirability of maintaining hierarchy and inequality among groups—known as "social dominance orientations" (SDO) (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). SDO is directly relevant to intergroup attitudes; a formidable literature exists showing strong interconnections between SDO and generalized prejudice and hostility toward a variety of outgroups and as well as with a wide variety of other political attitudes and behaviors.[7] For example, Bishin, Haynes, Incantalupo, and Smith (2016) report that, in general, American public opinion has not "backlashed" against policies favoring greater group rights, except, however, among those Americans relatively high in SDO. Many earlier studies have also connected dehumanization to social dominance orientations (e.g., Costello & Hodson, 2011; Esses, Veenvliet, Hodson, & Mihic, 2008; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Jackson & Gaertner, 2010; Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015). Finally, some extant research directly addresses hypotheses about how SDO structures reappropriation processes (e.g., Simmons & Parks-Yancy, 2014, p. 533). For these reasons, we expect those high in SDO to react more strongly to the source (high vs. low status) of the disparaging comment than do those low in SDO. As we explain below, we also expect that SDO will moderate many of the relationships we hypothesize.

### Specific Hypotheses to Be Tested

Within this controversy's context, we formalize our expectations in the following hypotheses[8]:

*Hypothesis 1 (Intergroup and Intragroup Variability):* Individuals and groups will vary in the degree to which they view "The Slants" as disparaging, with members of majority groups judging slurs as less offensive than members of minority groups.

*Hypothesis 2 (Context Matters):* Perceptions that the name is disparaging depend upon attributions of intent; the intents of ingroup members and of outgroup members are perceived differently, with reappropriation motives more likely to be attributed to ingroup members.

*Hypothesis 3 (Preexisting Attitudes):* Those more accepting of intergroup hierarchy and inequality (i.e., those high in SDO) are less likely to judge group slurs to be hurtful and disparaging.

We further expect that many of these relationships are moderated by social dominance orientations. Specifically, we hypothesize that SDO interacts with the ancestry of the band to which the respondent

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[7]As an example of how widely used social dominance theory has become, Sidanius, Cotterill, Sheehy-Skeffington, Kteily, and Carvacho (2017) report in their Table 8.1 the "Social psychological domains in which social dominance theory has been applied (since 2005)" (pp. 153–157). A total of 21 domains is listed in the four-and-a-half-page-long table.

[8]We have not preregistered these hypotheses, although we do note that most were formulated in a proposal for funding this project (available from the authors upon request), a proposal written, of course, well before any data were collected or analyzed.

was exposed and, in predicting disparagement perceptions, that SDO interacts with motives attributions. Those high in social dominance are unlikely to be sensitive to potentially disparaging terms inasmuch as they view group hierarchy and inequality as desirable. Similarly, high SDO people are also unlikely to recognize and accept reappropriation motives. Thus, our specific expectations regarding the interactions, for both Asian and non-Asian respondents, are as follows.

> *Hypothesis 4:* One's orientation toward social dominance will interact with the band ancestry experimental condition, with stronger dominance orientations associated with greater reactivity to the photo condition.
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> *Hypothesis 5:* Because social dominance orientations are expected to be particularly influential within the non-Asian subsample, for non-Asian respondents, one's orientation toward social dominance will interact with one's perceptions of reappropriation motives, with stronger dominance orientations weakening the linkage between motives attributions and disparagement judgments.
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> *Hypothesis 6:* Finally, the degree to which one attributes reappropriation motives to the band will interact with the band ancestry experimental condition, with exposure to the Asian band members exacerbating the effect of motives attributions on disparagement judgments.

## Research Design

This article relies, first, on a survey we commissioned on the American Panel Study (TAPS), a monthly nationally representative online survey. Technical information about the survey is available at www.taps.wustl.edu. Our module of questions on "The Slants" was included in the February/March 2017 version of the survey.

In addition, we commissioned a survey with GfK (the same firm responsible for the TAPS fieldwork) of the East Asian respondents in the KnowledgeNetwork panel. More specifically, we attempted to survey all panelists who had earlier identified themselves as being of either Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese ancestry.[9] The survey period lasted from March 4 until March 25, with all surveys conducted after oral argument in *Matal v. Tam* and prior to the release of the Court's decision. (For details, see Appendix S1 in the online supporting information.)

The "slants" survey module on both the TAPS and the GfK surveys is virtually identical, with questions pertaining both to the term "slants" and the band "The Slants."[10]

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[9]This sampling strategy was driven by two considerations: (1) the paucity of respondents in the KnowledgeNetwork panel not from East Asia and (2) the irrelevance of the term "slants" for many non-East Asian Asians (e.g., those from the Indian subcontinent). Our sample of "Asian Americans" has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, it is not, of course, representative of all Asian Americans (e.g., those from the Indian Subcontinent). Beyond that, however, the GfK interviews were all conducted in English; those East Asians not fluent in English were therefore not eligible to be included in the sample. Moreover, our sample likely overrepresents U.S. born East Asians and certainly underrepresents those not legally in the country. (See Appendix S5 in the online supporting information for a consideration of the influence of place of birth and citizenship on this analysis.) To some degree, our use of an experimental methodology mitigates the lack of full representativeness of the sample, but only to some degree. While we often seem to draw conclusions about Asian Americans in general, we are keenly aware that our findings, at best, pertain to Americans of East Asian ancestry who speak English, who were born in the United States, and who are willing to submit to an interview. For convenience and simplicity, we sometimes refer to this group as "East Asians" and sometimes as "Asian Americans."

[10]For the TAPS sample, we excluded the small handful of respondents claiming Asian ancestry. The decision has no implications for any of the substantive results nor for our ability to generalize to the American people as a whole, but it does slightly purify our Asian versus non-Asian comparisons.

"The Slants" – Condition 1                    "The Slants" – Condition 0

**Figure 1.** The experimental stimuli—the ancestry of the band. Condition 1 depicts the actual band, "The Slants," involved in the litigation. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

### *The Band Ancestry Experiment*

The most important experiment in this research concerns the ancestry make-up of the band. At the most basic level, the essential edifying attribute of reappropriation is that those seeking to disarm the term—to tame uncivil discourse—are members of the disparaged group. This is the argument the band itself made when it said, as Asian Americans, it seeks to "own" the term "slants."

We therefore devised an experiment in which half of the respondents (randomly assigned) were asked questions about the slur while a picture of the actual band (whose members are all Asian Americans) was shown on the screen; the other half of the sample was presented with a picture of a fictitious band whose members had European features.[11] Figure 1 shows the pictures used in the experiment. Our second hypothesis generally states that context matters. In this experiment, the apparent ancestry of the band represents the key contextual factor.[12]

### *Disparagement Judgments*

Our most important dependent variable is judgments of whether the band's name "The Slants" is disparaging. We operationalized "disparaging" in terms of ratings of appropriateness,

offensiveness, the degree of ridicule of the group, and negativity. The questions asked of all respondents about the band's name are:

What is your opinion of the band using the name "The Slants?" Please indicate how appropriate you believe it is for the band to use the name "The Slants." Please use the following scale, where 0 means "Not appropriate at all" and 10 means "Entirely appropriate," and the numbers in-between represent varying degrees of appropriateness. (student's $t$-test difference of means, $p > .05$[13]; relatively disparaging[14]: East Asian ancestry, 28.8%; non-Asian ancestry, 32.3%)

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[11]Considerable research investigates the influence of nonverbal cues on people. For examples, see Barisione and Iyengar (2016); Laustsen and Petersen (2016); and Olivola, Tingley, and Todorov (2018).

[12]See Appendix S2 in the online supporting information for a discussion of the manipulation checks on this experiment.

[13]The student's $t$ difference-of-means tests between the Asian and Non-Asian subsamples (and all substantive analyses in this article) are based on the uncategorized distributions.

[14]"Relatively disparaging" is the percentage providing a score of 6 or greater on the 0 to 10 response set to the item. This categorization is *only* used for illustrative purposes and never for analytical or statistical purposes.

How offensive do you believe it is for the band to use the name "The Slants?" Please use the following scale, where 0 means "Not offensive at all" and 10 means "Extremely offensive," and the numbers in-between represent varying degrees of offensiveness. (student's *t*-test difference of means, *p* > .05; relatively disparaging: East Asian ancestry, 31.9%; non-Asian ancestry, 29.8%)

How much would you say the name "The Slants" ridicules those of Asian ancestry, if at all? Please use the following scale, where 0 means "Doesn't ridicule at all" and 10 means "Ridicules a great deal," and the numbers in-between represent varying degrees of ridicule. (student's *t*-test difference of means, *p* = .019; relatively disparaging: East Asian ancestry, 33.7%; non-Asian ancestry, 37.8%)

And finally, regarding the band's name itself, how would you rate the term "The Slants" in terms of being extremely positive to extremely negative. (student's *t*-test difference of means, *p* = .031; relatively disparaging: East Asian ancestry, 32.9%; non-Asian ancestry, 33.6%)

As the descriptive data reported with each question indicate, the band's name is not, on average, judged as extremely disparaging. For example, regarding offensiveness, 12.8% of the Asian respondents (17.3%, non-Asians) evaluated the name as "not offensive at all," while only 8.5% rated it as "extremely offensive" (17.5%, non-Asians). (Data not shown.)

These four indicators all reflect a single underlying latent construct defined as judgments of the degree to which the term is perceived as disparaging. When subjected to common factor analysis (CFA), a single strong factor emerges (eigenvalue$_2$ = .43), and all items load strongly on that factor. The item-set is also quite reliable (Cronbach's alpha = .88). Accordingly, we created an index of perceived disparagement from the responses to these four statements (and have scored it, and all other variables, to range from 0 to 1).

### *The Reappropriation Motives of the Band*

We hypothesize that the perceived motives of the band intervene between the relationship between the experimental pictures and the judgments of whether the terms are disparaging. To assess this conjecture, we asked (using 5-point Likert response sets) for reactions to the following statements:

The band probably wanted to use "The Slants" as a badge or symbol of Asian pride rather than ridicule (student's *t*-test difference of means, *p* > .05; agree: East Asian ancestry, 34.1%; non-Asian ancestry, 37.7%).

The band probably thought that if they themselves used the name it would make the term less insulting and therefore take away the hurt and sting of the term when used by those prejudiced against people of Asian ancestry (student's *t*-test difference of means, *p* < .05; agree: East Asian ancestry, 24.8%; non-Asian ancestry, 31.1%).

The band probably wanted to throw the slur right back in the faces of those prejudiced against people of Asian ancestry (student's *t*-test difference of means, *p* > .05; agree: East Asian ancestry, 27.6%; non-Asian ancestry, 30.7%).

For using the name "The Slants," the band ought to be admired because they have shown that it is possible to stand up to those who are prejudiced against people of Asian ancestry (agree: East Asian ancestry, 21.5%; non-Asian ancestry, 16.1%; *t*-test difference of means, *p* > .05).

On only a single item (statement 2 above) is the difference in the responses between the Asian and non-Asian subsamples statistically significant; and, for this item, non-Asians are actually *more likely*

than Asians to ascribe reattribution motives to the band. Still, on three of the four indicators, Asians and non-Asians gave similar responses to these motives attributions questions.

Using the responses to these four statements, we created an index of perceived reappropriation motives. The four-item set has strong psychometric properties. For both the main non-Asian sample and the Asian oversample, the item-sets are strongly unidimensional and highly reliable. Cronbach's alpha for the East Asian oversample is .75; for the non-Asian sample, it is .76. All items load strongly on the first unrotated factor from the common factor analysis. The two subsamples do not differ significantly on the summary reappropriation index.

### *Social Dominance Orientations*

Recall that social dominance orientations (SDO) are conceptualized as the degree to which one believes that minority groups should be subordinate to majority groups, or "the degree to which one endorses group-based social inequality and group-based dominance" (Sidanius & Veniegas, 2000, p. 12). To measure SDO, we employed nearly all the items recommended in the short-form version of the social dominance scale (see Ho et al., 2015; see also Sidanius & Pratto, 2001; for the items and other measurement details, see Appendix S3 in the online supporting information). We use a summated index as our indicator of social dominance orientations. On this index, the difference between the Asians and the non-Asians is neither substantively strong nor statistically significant ($r = .03$; $p = .096$).

### **Analysis**

We first consider whether the band-ancestry experiment had the hypothesized effect on disparagement judgments and on the perceived motives of the band. Figure 2 reports the results.

As the data in the figure show—and as expected—motives attributions are fairly strongly related to which photograph the respondent observed. For both the Asian and non-Asian subsamples, those presented with a picture of the Asian band were much more likely to attribute motives of reappropriation, although the relationship is slightly stronger for the Asian subsample. For both Asians and non-Asians shown the picture with Asian band members, the mean reappropriation score is identical (.57).

For disparagement judgments, the relationships are much weaker, with the difference of means on the disparagement index for the Asian subsample only achieving marginal statistical significance. More important, the experimental manipulation had a contrary effect on disparagement judgments as compared to motives attributions. While viewing the band with members of Asian ancestry is associated with a slightly *higher* likelihood of ascribing reappropriation motives, it is also associated with a *higher* likelihood of viewing the band's name as disparaging. As the figures reveal, the mean disparagement scores for the Asian and non-Asian subsamples who viewed the band with European members is the same (.51). For both subsamples, exposure to the band of Asians increased the disparagement mean, although slightly more so for the *non-Asian* respondents. So, although people in both subsamples reacted somewhat differently to the photo of Asian band members as compared to that of non-Asian band members, the effect on motives attributions is much stronger, and the effect on disparagement judgments is weaker and in the opposite direction. This likely means that the connection between motives attributions and disparagement assessments is conditional on the photo shown to the respondent—a hypothesis we assess below.

Within both the Asian and non-Asian subsamples, reappropriation motives and disparagement judgments are negatively correlated, although the relationship is stronger for the Asians than it is for the non-Asians (−.19 vs. −.09, respectively). However, the correlation of the motives/disparagement variables depends substantially on the type of band shown to the respondent. For the non-Asians, the

## A. Reappropriation Index

### Asian Subsample



### Non-Asian Subsample



## B. Whether the Band's Name is Disparaging
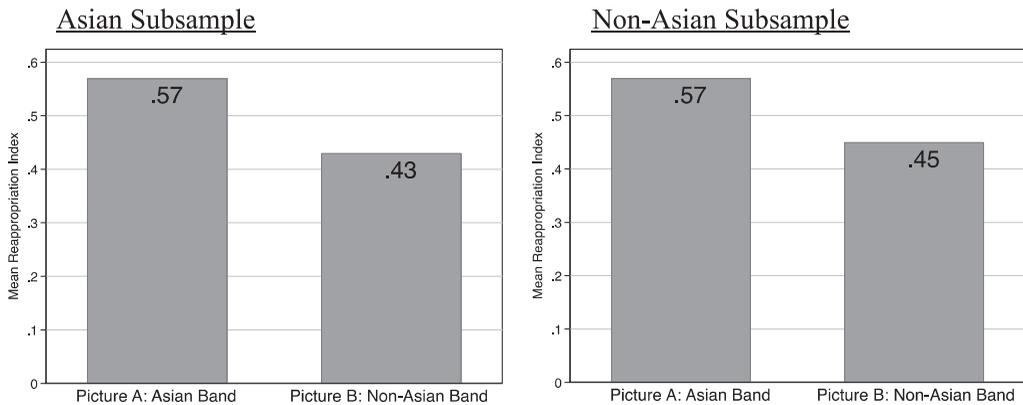
### Asian Subsample



### Non-Asian Subsample
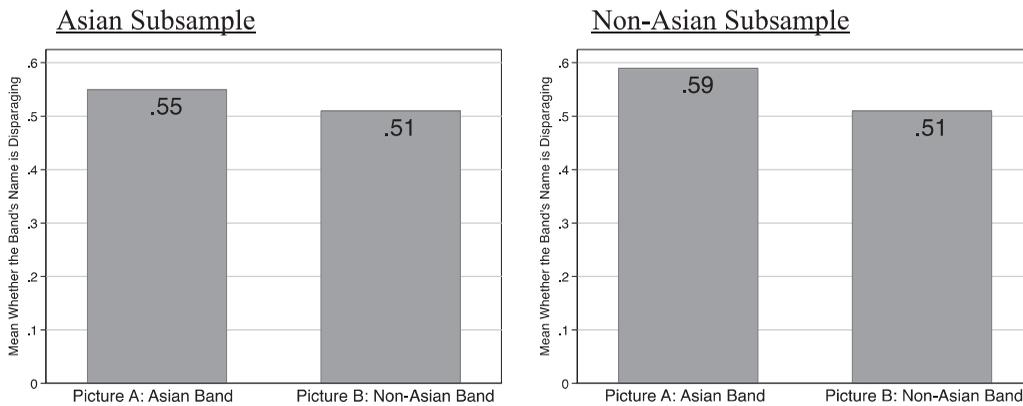


**Figure 2.** The effect of the band ancestry experiment on attributions of motives and disparagement perceptions. (1) Reappropriation index: For the Asian subsample ($N = 509$): difference of means, $F$-test: $p < .001$; Pearson's $r$: .40; for the non-Asian subsample ($N = 2045$): difference of means, $F$-test: $p < .001$; Pearson's $r$: .32. (2) Whether the band's name is disparaging: For the Asian subsample ($N = 510$): difference of means, $F$-test: $p = .024$; Pearson's $r$: .10; for the non-Asian subsample ($N = 2046$): difference of means, $F$-test: $p < .001$; Pearson's $r$: .15.

correlations are $-.06$ and $-.24$ for the non-Asian and Asian band conditions, respectively. For the Asian respondents, the difference is even more dramatic: The correlations are **$-.03$** and **$-.47$** for the non-Asian and Asian band conditions, respectively. It seems that the Asian band photograph generated much greater and more systematic thought about the motives of the band—most likely because the context was nonprototypical in the sense that *Asians* seemed to be saying something bad about *Asians*.[15] Reappropriation seems to generate an unusual circumstance in the eyes of bystanders, one that does indeed cause them to think further about the meaning of the slur. If the conclusion of this

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[15]To be clear, the control group in this experiment is meant to represent a prototypical scenario: Members of a majority group (white European Americans) seeming to insult a minority group (analogous to whites appearing in blackface). We recognize that the control condition may be more ambiguous and ambivalent than the experimental condition, with the consequence that motives attributions will be more difficult and diverse because the stimulus involves European band members using an anti-Asian slur as their name presented in a photo with an Asian background. However, as a control group in which the only difference is the apparent ancestry of the band members, we consider the condition a useful baseline for comparing to the experimental condition.

additional thought is that the intent of the band is reappropriation, then assessments of whether the use of the term is disparaging decline.

This finding requires, of course, further multivariate testing. As noted earlier, we posit that perceptions of the band's motives are an antecedent to judgments of whether the band's name is disparaging to those of Asian ancestry. Of course, the causal relationship between these variables is to some degree debatable. Nonetheless, it seems more reasonable to assume that the respondents first made judgments about the band's motives and then, on the basis of those judgments, determined whether the band's name is in fact disparaging, rather than vice versa. Moreover, a supplemental survey we conducted to address this issue supports the causal ordering we posit. Appendix S6 in the online supporting information addresses the matter of the causal relationship between these two variables in considerable detail.[16] For the analysis that follows, we therefore include the motives variable as a predictor of disparagement judgments. We also treat motives as a dependent variable in its own right, but without using disparagement judgments as a predictor in the motives equation (but see Appendix S6 for further analysis of this issue).

We specify a multivariate equation that includes several additional variables: (1) whether the respondent had previously heard of the band, (2) social dominance orientations, and (3) control variables, consisting of age, gender, education, and social class (whether one owns one's home).[17] Of course, our primary interest in SDO centers on its role as a moderating variable, but we begin the analysis with a basic model for each subsample. Table 1 reports the results.

We consider first the predictors of judgments that the band's name is disparaging. For both subsamples, motives attributions are strong predictors of disparagement, even in the multivariate equations. Those who see the band as engaging in reappropriation are considerably less likely to view the band's name as disparaging. The relationship is stronger among Asians but is still strong among the non-Asian respondents. Perceived motives matter.

In addition, the effects of the manipulation of the band's ancestry, although somewhat weaker than the effects of the motives attributions, are still statistically significant and substantial. Holding motives constant, respondents shown a picture of the band with Asian members are more likely to view the band's name as disparaging. (However, even in the multivariate case, a strong interaction exists between the experimental condition and attributions of reappropriation motives, as we discuss below.)

The disparagement judgments of non-Asians are influenced by prior exposure to the band, with those having heard of the band less likely to judge its name as offensive. For those of Asian ancestry, no such relationship exists. For non-Asians, prior exposure to the band is likely associated with attentiveness to Asian affairs, although we note that the effect is independent of the respondent's age and other demographic variables.

As expected, the influence of social dominance orientations differs dramatically between the Asian and non-Asian subsamples. For the former, SDO seems to be completely disconnected from disparagement judgments. For the latter, however, those with stronger dominance orientations—those finding inequality and hierarchy agreeable—are *very much* less likely to view the band's name as disparaging. *Indeed, SDO is the single strongest predictor of these judgments for non-Asians.* This finding is all the more interesting considering that Asians and non-Asians do *not* differ in their average dominance orientations (data not shown).

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[16]In short, that analysis shows that motives attributions are considerably more likely to cause disparagement judgments than disparagement judgments are to cause motives attributions. Consequently, that analysis supports the causal ordering we report in the main body of this article.

[17]See Appendix S5 in the online supporting information for an analysis that adds, for most but not all of the Asian subsample, citizenship status to the equations reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Predictors of Reappropriation Motives Attributions and Disparagement Judgments

| | Motives Attributions | | | | | | Disparagement Judgments | | | | | |
| | Asians | | | Non-Asians | | | Asians | | | Non-Asians | | |
| | b | s.e. | p | b | s.e. | p | b | s.e. | p | b | s.e. | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Motives | – | – | – | – | – | – | –.33 | .06 | .001 | –.23 | .03 | .001 |
| Band-Ancestry Manipulation | .15 | .02 | .001 | .13 | .01 | .001 | .09 | .02 | .001 | .11 | .01 | .001 |
| Heard of the Band | .12 | .03 | .001 | .11 | .01 | .001 | .00 | .02 | >.05 | –.07 | .02 | .001 |
| SDO | .03 | .04 | >.05 | –.12 | .02 | .001 | –.08 | .06 | >.05 | –.31 | .03 | .001 |
| Age | .00 | .01 | >.05 | –.01 | .01 | >.05 | .00 | .02 | >.05 | .03 | .01 | .006 |
| Gender (Male) | –.04 | .02 | .008 | –.01 | .01 | >.05 | –.02 | .02 | >.05 | –.01 | .01 | >.05 |
| Education | .01 | .02 | >.05 | .01 | .01 | >.05 | .06 | .02 | .001 | –.01 | .01 | >.05 |
| Home Ownership | .03 | .02 | >.05 | .02 | .01 | .045 | –.05 | .02 | .018 | .00 | .01 | >.05 |
| Intercept | .39 | .03 | .001 | .47 | .02 | .001 | .70 | .04 | .001 | .67 | .03 | .001 |
| Dependent Variable—Standard Deviation | .19 | | | .19 | | | .22 | | | .26 | | |
| Standard Error of Estimate | .17 | | | .18 | | | .21 | | | .25 | | |
| $R^2$ | .20 | | .001 | .15 | | .001 | .11 | | .001 | .11 | | .001 |
| N | 507 | | | 2005 | | | 507 | | | 2005 | | |

*Note*: See Appendix S4 in the online supporting information for information on the distributions of each of these variables. All variables are scored to range from 0 to 1.

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The equations focusing on motives attributions are considerably more predictive, especially for respondents of Asian origin. For this subsample, the best determinant of reappropriation attributions is the experimental treatment, followed by prior exposure to the band. The non-Asians reveal a similar pattern. As with disparagement judgments, SDO plays a significant role in predicting reappropriation attributions for the non-Asians, but no role for the Asians. Those higher in SDO are less likely to attribute reappropriation motives to the band.

In some respects, the East Asian and non-Asian samples produce similar results. The experiment influenced both motives attributions and disparagement judgments. Motives are also strongly connected to judgments. Prior exposure to the band has weak effects, although for Asians its effect is on motives attributions, while for non-Asians it is on disparagement judgments.

The big difference between the two subsamples concerns the role of social dominance orientations. For the non-Asians, those high in SDO are considerably less likely to attribute reappropriation motives and a great deal less likely to view the band's name as disparaging. This finding demonstrates the close connection between this band-name controversy and more general intergroup attitudes and values.

### *Social Dominance and Band Ancestry Interactive Hypotheses*

The analysis above uncovered the expected direct effect of SDO with attributions and perceptions within the non-Asian subsample. But perhaps these effects do not tell the whole story. As we hypothesized above, we expect that SDO conditions some of the other relationships reported in Table 1. Table 2 reports the data necessary to test these hypotheses.

The coefficients in this table provide strong support for the band ancestry by motives interaction in the disparagement equation, for both the Asian and the non-Asian subsamples. (See Appendix S7 in the online supporting information for marginal effects figures for these various relationships.) For the Asians, the coefficient for motives among those who viewed a picture of a band with European members is indistinguishable from 0 ($-.11$, $p > .05$). For those shown a picture with Asian band members, the coefficient for motives balloons to $-.72$ ($[-.11-.61]$; $p < .001$): Those attributing reappropriation motives to the band are *much* less likely to view the band's name as disparaging. If the motives can be inferred from the attributes of the speaker, motives attributions can indeed disarm insulting slurs.

The band ancestry manipulation also significantly interacts with social dominance orientations, for both the Asian and the non-Asian subsamples. In both instances, the effect is similar to the motives interaction just discussed. For the Asian subsample, the relationship of SDO to disparagement judgments when exposed to European band members is trivial ($-.05$; $p > .05$). However, in the instance of exposure to Asian band members, the connection of SDO increases to a highly significant $-.41$: Those with strong dominance orientations are substantially less likely to view the band's name as disparaging under this condition. For those not of Asian origin, the relationship of SDO is similar, although, like the effect of motives, SDO is strongly related even among the respondents exposed to the European band members.

Finally, a strong interaction exists between SDO and motives attributions, but only for the non-Asian subsample. As SDO increases, the effect of motives attributions on disparagement assessments shifts from negative ($-.26$, $p < .001$, at the lowest level of SDO) to positive ($+.40$, $p < .001$, at the highest level of SDO). When SDO is high, non-Asians who attribute reappropriation motives to the band are more likely to judge the band's name to be disparaging. (For additional analysis of these interactive effects, see Appendix S7 in the online supporting information.)

In terms of predicting the attribution of reappropriation motives, we expect that one's dominance orientation will interact with the band ancestry manipulation, but only for non-Asians. Table 2 also reports the analysis relevant to this hypothesis.

**Table 2.** Interactive Predictors of Reappropriation Motives Attributions and Disparagement Judgments

| | Motives Attributions | | | | | | Disparagement Judgments | | | | | |
| | Asians | | | Non-Asians | | | Asians | | | Non-Asians | | |
| | b | s.e. | p | b | s.e. | p | b | s.e. | p | b | s.e. | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Motives | – | – | – | – | – | – | –.11 | .11 | >.05 | –.26 | .06 | .001 |
| Band-Ancestry Manipulation | .15 | .02 | .001 | .16 | .01 | .001 | .50 | .06 | .001 | .34 | .04 | .001 |
| Heard of the Band | .12 | .03 | .001 | .11 | .01 | .001 | .00 | .03 | >.05 | –.08 | .02 | .001 |
| SDO | .03 | .04 | >.05 | –.07 | .03 | .036 | –.05 | .14 | >.05 | –.53 | .08 | .001 |
| Age | .00 | .01 | >.05 | –.01 | .01 | >.05 | –.01 | .01 | >.05 | .03 | .01 | .031 |
| Gender (Male) | –.04 | .02 | .008 | .00 | .01 | >.05 | –.02 | .02 | >.05 | –.01 | .01 | >.05 |
| Education | .01 | .02 | >.05 | .01 | .01 | >.05 | .06 | .02 | .001 | –.01 | .01 | >.05 |
| Home Ownership | .03 | .02 | >.05 | .02 | .01 | >.05 | –.05 | .02 | .012 | –.01 | .01 | >.05 |
| Band Ancestry × Motives | – | – | – | – | – | – | –.61 | .11 | .001 | –.32 | .06 | .001 |
| Band Ancestry × SDO | – | – | – | –.10 | .04 | .027 | –.36 | .11 | .001 | –.22 | .06 | .001 |
| SDO × Motives | – | – | – | – | – | – | .28 | .28 | >.05 | .66 | .15 | .001 |
| Intercept | .39 | .03 | .001 | .46 | .02 | .001 | .57 | .06 | .001 | .67 | .04 | .001 |
| Dependent Variable—Standard Deviation | .19 | | | .19 | | | .22 | | | .26 | | |
| Standard Error of Estimate | .17 | | | .18 | | | .20 | | | .25 | | |
| $R^2$ | .20 | | .001 | .15 | | .001 | .18 | | .001 | .13 | | .001 |
| N | 507 | | | 2005 | | | 507 | | | 2005 | | |

*Note*: See Appendix S4 in the online supporting information for information on the distributions of each of these variables. All variables are scored to range from 0 to 1.

The data support our expectations. For non-Asians, the effect of the band manipulation is reduced to insignificance as SDO moves from its lowest to its highest scores (.16 to .06). Put slightly differently, the consequence of increasing SDO is to reduce the impact of the photos, which is to say that the motives attributions differ little according to which band photo the respondent observed. SDO dominates: At the highest levels of SDO, the respondent's motives attributions do not depend much on the characteristics of the band. Neither of these interactions is particularly strong, however. In general, we can conclude that motives attributions are to some degree dependent upon both the band ancestry manipulation and the preexisting psychological attributes of the respondents.

Based on the above analyses, we suspect that something like the following processes may be taking place.

Visual cues signal a nonprototypical situation. In this case, a group of Asians is using an anti-Asian slur.

The nonprototypical situation leads people to wonder: What are the motivations of the group?

Some understand that the motives have to do with reappropriation.

Some are unconcerned with reappropriation, because they do not care whether the words are taken as slurs, because they tend to embrace inequality and group hierarchy.

Those who attribute reappropriation motives to the speaker are more forgiving of the use of the slur.

None of these processes take place in the prototypical condition.

## Discussion and Concluding Comments

A primary purpose of this research has been to ask whether reappropriation can be an effective political strategy for reducing the effects of insults, both with members of the disparaged group and with bystanders. Our most basic conclusion is that, under some circumstances, words that seem to insult a group can be disarmed and neutralized. That is, when a group is seen as taking control of a historically disparaging term, it can indeed neutralize the insulting content of the term. And it does so among the group that is the target of the insult as well as among members of the majority group. Reappropriation does indeed seem to work in the sense of defusing insults, rendering them less disparaging and harmful.

But reappropriation works mainly when observers are able to draw inferences about the motives and intent of the speakers. In our case, nonverbal cues indicating that the speakers are themselves members of the disparaged group seem to generate inferences that the intent of using the slur is not to insult. Because no malice is perceived to be intended, the use of the name "The Slants" is not judged to be disparaging. It seems that when nonprototypical instances of intergroup insults occur—as in this case—people seek an explanation for the unusual conduct by trying to infer the motives of those responsible for the insults.

We have also confirmed the hypothesis that, for non-Asians, motives attributions are strongly connected to social dominance orientations. Those who embrace intergroup inequality are less likely to view the band's name as disparaging. They are also relatively insensitive to whether the slur originates with members of the minority group or with the majority group. It is noteworthy that those low in SDO seem much more predisposed to attribute reappropriation motives to the band and therefore to judge the band's name as less disparaging.

One of the most intriguing conclusions of this research is that none of these SDO findings pertain to those of East Asian ancestry; their social dominance orientations are largely irrelevant to the reappropriation processes we investigate in this article. This cannot be attributed to the assumption that East Asians are markedly lower in SDO than our non-Asian respondents: They are not (see Appendix S3 in the online supporting information). Inasmuch as we have acknowledged the limitations on generalizing from our East Asian sample, this finding is certainly one that requires additional research (just as does our finding that those of Vietnamese origin seem to score especially high on the SDO index). In general, we know too little about SDO among minorities and especially among Asians.

One innovation of this research is that it posits and finds heterogeneous treatment effects. The existence of heterogeneous treatment effects among respondents to survey experiments is not uncommon, but these analyses are often conducted post hoc to justify the presence of statistically significant treatment effects among subgroups of respondents. In contrast, our study is designed for (and succeeds at) testing theoretically justified, a priori hypotheses about the heterogeneous treatment effects of insulting speech, conditional on speakers' perceived ethnicity, among Asian and non-Asian respondents. The examination of these heterogeneous effects is built into the design of our framing experiment and, per our expectations, is borne out in the results.

Our analysis also connects to more general conclusions about uncivil discourse and intergroup conflict. First, context matters. In one of the U.S. Supreme Court's seminal free speech rulings, the case turned on whether calling someone (a cop) a "goddamn racketeer" constitutes "fighting words." Such an epithet seems quaint in the context of contemporary American politics. The power of words is undoubtedly context dependent.

Second, it seems unlikely to us that disparaging slurs ever will be effectively excised from political discourse. Bad words exist in every society, whether they are spoken or not. What seems more important is that such words are allowed to contaminate discourse as little as possible, just as true fighting words make further debate improbable. Reappropriation is a strategy for neutralizing the sting of insults, perhaps allowing political arguments to proceed. To the extent that minorities can armor themselves against insults, via reappropriation or other tools, the marketplace of ideas is more likely to be effective. And, the bad words need not be banned.

Finally, while we believe that insults often add considerable heat to real political and social conflicts—as people feel "disrespected"—our research has not addressed the consequences of group-based slurs among those who reject or fail to recognize reappropriation as a legitimate strategy. Many of our respondents understood the motives of the band but nonetheless judged the band's name offensive. Real conflicts generate a mixture of reactions and judgments, a panoply of emotions that, we admit, is not easily captured in an experimental context.

Our research also does not address the empowerment thesis found in some other work (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2013). We do not know whether a sense of self-efficacy flows from reappropriation, via the effort to take control of one's circumstances. We doubt that this is true of non-Asians, but it may be that one positive consequence of reappropriation is that members of the disparaged group wind up empowering themselves. The empowerment hypothesis certainly deserves further consideration if only because it suggests yet another benefit of reappropriation.

More generally, learning more about reappropriation processes—among majorities and minorities—seems essential for understanding political discourse and conflict in these politicized times. Reappropriation may not always work and may not always work for all. But political discourse is too important in a democratic society to allow it to be shut down because insults may wound minority groups (see Chemerinsky & Gillman, 2017). Because it is unlikely that the views of those who wish to issue insults can be easily changed, developing strategies to inoculate against group disparagement seems crucial for taming uncivil discourse. Perhaps reappropriation is one such strategy for achieving that end.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

**Appendix S1.** The East Asian American Oversample
**Appendix S2.** Band Ancestry Manipulation Checks

**Appendix S3.** Social Dominance Orientations
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**Table S7.4.** The Marginal Effect of Social Dominance Orientation on Disparagement Judgments as a Function of Motives Attribution (non-Asians only; Asian band photographic treatment)