I, Julie A. Murphy, hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy in Psychology.

It is entitled: The Use of Sexual Orientation-Related Insults Among College Students

This work and its defense approved by:

Chair: Steven R. Howe, Ph.D.
Edward Klein, Ph.D.
James Koschoreck, Ph.D.
Daniel Langmeyer, Ph.D.
Paula Shear, Ph.D.
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by

Julie A. Murphy
B.A., University of Maryland, University College, 1991
B.A., University of Maryland, College Park, 1995
M.A., University of Cincinnati, 1999

Committee Chair: Steven R. Howe, Ph.D.
The purpose of this study was: to determine what insults college students know and use; to develop a model of insult use in general, and of sexual orientation-related insult (SOI) use in particular; and, to understand the impact of SOI use on students of different sexual orientations. Data were collected from interview participants, field observations on and around a university campus, top-rated movies and TV shows, and two focus groups with lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) students. Overall, the interview participants generated 1,453 insults, a mean of 20 insults. Men listed significantly more SOI’s than women. The insult categories rated as “worst” by participants were race-related, SOI’s, and insults for women. Field data yielded 317 insults. The three most frequent categories of field insults were for women, personality-related insults, and SOI’s (accounting for 14.5% of field insults). *Fag* was one of the five most frequently overheard insults, and was used significantly more frequently by men than women. None of the recorded SOI uses appeared to be directed to an LGB target. The media data yielded 655 insults, with comedies including significantly more insults than dramas. SOI’s accounted for 1.8% of media insults.

Decisions regarding both serious and good-natured insult use involved four major components: insulter characteristics, social cues to be read, social cues to be conveyed, and the response of the insult target (and sometimes of an audience). The majority of heterosexual participants identified SOI’s as inappropriate to direct towards LGB people, though LGB participants described numerous examples of being maliciously targeted with SOI’s. Heterosexual participants who were supportive of LGB people were significantly less likely to use SOI’s than participants who were ambivalent or disapproving. Heterosexual men used SOI’s with greater frequency than heterosexual women. These men used SOI’s primarily as tools of peer pressure and regulating gender role expression in other men. SOI’s were a safe way for men with traditional conceptions of masculinity to express affection for each other while asserting heterosexuality; less traditional men were less likely to use SOI’s.
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Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures ............................................................................................................... 2

Chapter 1: Introduction.................................................................................................................... 1

  Insults, Slang, & Swearing ........................................................................................................ 1
  Use & Function of Insults ....................................................................................................... 3
  Sexual Orientation and Gender Role-Related Insults ......................................................... 5
  Response to and Impact of Sexual Orientation & Gender Role-Related Insults ............ 8
  Summary & Research Goals ............................................................................................... 10

Chapter 2: Method ....................................................................................................................... 12

  Interview & Insult List Procedures ...................................................................................... 12
  Field Insult Data Collection Procedure ............................................................................ 14
  Media Insult Data Collection Procedure .......................................................................... 14
  Focus Group Procedures .................................................................................................... 15

Chapter 3: Thousands of Insults (Quantitative Data) ................................................................. 16

  Participant Insult Lists ....................................................................................................... 16
  Field Insult Data Collection ............................................................................................... 18
  Insults in Movies & TV Shows ........................................................................................... 18
  Limitations of the Quantitative Component ..................................................................... 22

Chapter 4: A Model of Insult Use ............................................................................................... 23

  Insulter Characteristics ..................................................................................................... 23
  Social Cues to Read and Convey ...................................................................................... 27
  Target & Audience Response ........................................................................................... 53
  Misunderstandings ............................................................................................................. 57

Chapter 5: Users & Targets of Sexual Orientation & Gender-Related Insults .......................... 59

  Language Used: Insulting vs. Proper Terms ..................................................................... 59
  Insults Towards Men ........................................................................................................ 60
  Insults Directed Towards Women .................................................................................... 77
  Discussion ........................................................................................................................... 85

Chapter 6: Overall Discussion & Suggestions for Future Research ........................................ 88

  The Social Rules of Sexual Orientation-Related Insult Use .......................................... 88
  The Meaning of Sexual Orientation-Related Insults ......................................................... 90
  The Limitations of Insult Listing and Field Data Collection ........................................... 93
  Interventions to Decrease SOI Use .................................................................................. 94

Tables & Figures ......................................................................................................................... 96

References ................................................................................................................................ 117

Appendix A: Insult Categories & Insults Included in Each Category ....................................... 124
List of Tables and Figures

Tables
Table 2.1: Interview Guide................................................................................................... 97
Table 2.2: Insult Categories & Prototypical Examples ......................................................... 99
Table 2.3: Top 30 Grossing Movies of 2002 as Rated by The-Movie-Times.com ............... 100
Table 2.4: 20 Top-Rated Prime Time Television Shows ....................................................... 101
Table 2.5: Focus Group Interview Guide ............................................................................. 102
Table 3.1: Frequency of Insults in Each Category from Participants, Field
Data & Media Data .............................................................................................................. 103
Table 3.2: 20 Most Frequently Listed Insults by Interview Participants............................. 104
Table 3.3: 10 Most Frequent Insults by Sex-Race Groups................................................... 105
Table 3.4: 10 Insults Rated Worst ........................................................................................ 107
Table 3.5: Distribution of Worst Insults by Category ............................................................ 108
Table 3.6: Insults Rated Worst Most Frequently by Sex-Race Groups............................... 109
Table 3.7: Most Frequently Used Insults in Field Data Collection ..................................... 110
Table 3.8: Tone of Insults Used in Each Category ................................................................. 111
Table 3.9: TV & Movie Insult Means .................................................................................... 112
Table 3.10: 10 Most Frequently Used Insults in Movies & TV ............................................ 113
Table 5.1: Sexual Orientation-Related and Inappropriate Gender Role Adherence
Insults Generated by Participants ...................................................................................... 115
Table 5.2: Synonyms for Sexual Orientation-Related and Inappropriate
Gender Role Adherence Insults ....................................................................................... 116

Figures
Figure 4.1: A Model of Insult Use ..................................................................................... 114
Chapter 1

Introduction

The present study was undertaken, in part, to understand what my students meant when they made statements such as, “That is so gay.” I wondered about what factors differentiated between students in both their uses of sexual orientation-related insults (SOI’s) and their reactions to such insults. For example, why were some of my heterosexual students offended by sexual orientation-related insults (SOI’s) and some of my lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students not offended? I was particularly interested in how the intent of SOI use among heterosexuals compared to the experience of SOI use among LGB students. To address these questions, the present study was designed to describe college student insults and the social rules regulating their use, how and why SOI’s and gender role-related insults (GRI’s) are used, and the impact of SOI’s and GRI’s on students of different sexual orientations. This study relied heavily on social psychological literature and conceptualizations to understand the social dynamics of insult use.

Insults, Slang, and Swearing

Teenagers use more slang and swear words than adults (Bailey, 1985; Bailey and Timm, 1976; deKlerk, 1990; Nelsen & Rosenbaum, 1972; Sagarin, 1962; Sutton, 1995), though increasing age is not a direct correlate of frequency of use (Risch, 1987). Historically, men used more slang and swear words than women (Flexner, 1975; Hughes, 1991; Kutner & Brogan, 1974), though recent studies have found only minor differences between men and women in frequency and use (deKlerk, 1990, 1991; Grossman & Tucker, 1997; Reiber, Wiedemann & D’Amato, 1979; Sutton, 1995). Other variables, such as political beliefs and social context, also affect frequency of use.

Reiber, Wiedemann, and D’Amato (1979) found that feminist women reported greater “obscenity” use than did non-feminist women. In addition, research participants have reported that they use fewer slang and swear words in contexts where someone might be offended by their language (Bailey & Timm, 1976; Winters & Duck, 2001).

Though frequency of use is similar between women and men, there are significant sex differences in word choice. Martin (1997) conducted a study in which participants read gender-neutralized transcripts of conversations. Participants were able to identify speaker gender based on the particular slang and swear words the speaker used. In addition, multiple studies have found that there are more derogatory slang terms to describe women than there are to describe men (Allen, 1984; Grossman & Tucker, 1997; Hughes, 1991; Nelsen & Rosenbaum, 1972).
Language is clearly affected by both individual and cultural factors. Thus, some words may be consistent over time (e.g., *fag* has been used as an insult towards gay men since at least 1923; Hughes, 1991) and others may be used for only a brief time period (e.g., *tribade* to refer to lesbians; Hughes, 1991). Over the past 20 years, a handful of studies have asked young people about the slang and insult words they knew and used. Risch (1987) recruited 44 women from English classes at the University of Cincinnati. She introduced the terms “broad, chick, cunt, [and] piece of ass” as terms men use for women. Then she asked participants, “Can you think of any similar terms or phrases that you or your friends use to refer to males?” (p. 355). Sophomores (N=15) wrote an average of 8.7 terms each, and first-year students wrote 5.1 terms each. Risch sorted the terms into the following categories: birth (e.g., *son of a bitch*), ass, head (e.g., *shithead*), dick (e.g., *cocksucker*), boys (e.g., *pretty boy*), animal (e.g., *dog*), meat, and other (e.g., *jerk-off, whore*). All categories were approximately equal in frequency.

deKlerk (1990) developed a list of non-slang words (e.g., “an unlikable woman,” “an unlikable man,” “an effeminate/cowardly male,” “a romantic attachment”), then asked 160 13 to 17 year-old white South African students to list all of the slang terms they knew for the non-slang terms on the list. She found “an overall abundance” (p. 600) of slang terms for unattractive girls, attractive girls, and effeminate males.

Hummon (1994) conducted a study to understand college-specific slang. He recruited 51 students at University of California at Davis to list and define “student identities that you know are used by students at UC Davis” (p. 78). At Holy Cross College, he asked 137 students to conduct interviews with peers to find out what labels the “students use to identify different types of students at Holy Cross” (p. 78). In addition, these students recorded the slang terms they heard during one half-day on campus. The students identified slang terms in the following categories: campus life (e.g., *blow-off artist, brown-noser*), personality attributes (e.g., *dweeb, loser*), physical attributes (e.g., *butt ugly*), values (e.g., *granola, commie*), and societal groups (e.g., *spicks, hick, fag*). The greatest number of terms were generated in the societal groups category (including gender, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, generation, and rural/urban status), accounting for 35% of the terms generated at Holy Cross, and 40% of the terms at UC Davis. More than half of the terms in the societal groups category were slang terms for women. Sexual orientation-related terms accounted for 2% of all terms at Holy Cross and 3% of all terms at UC Davis.

Finally, in the only study specifically addressing insults (as opposed to slang), Thurlow (2001) asked 377 Welch and English 14 and 15 year-olds, “What words do people at school use for slagging someone off?” To slag is
“to criticize or deride someone harshly” (p. 27). Students listed an average of 15.8 terms, which Thurlow sorted into one of nine categories: homophobic, racist, “Top-5” (cunt, wanker, motherfucker, bastard, fuck), sexist, phallocentric, scatological, social-personality (e.g., loner, stupid), physicality, and “uncategorized” (e.g., jackass, pedophile). As Thurlow’s main interest was in SOI’s and race-related insults, those were the primary categories for any insults that could potentially be classified in multiple categories. Thus, the Top-5 category included the five most frequent, non-SOI’s and non-race-related insults (Thurlow does not identify whether any SOI or race-related insult would have qualified for this category). Thurlow hypothesized that the five most frequently listed insults would be more taboo than the other insults, and therefore merited their own category. Insults were most frequent in the sexist, Top-5, phallocentric, uncategorized, and homophobic categories, in that order. Thurlow also asked participants to mark the worst insults on their lists. The majority of the worst insults were in the Top-5 and sexist categories.

Use and Function of Insults

Classifying lists of slang and insult terms by referent neglects the more psychologically interesting element of function. Winters and Duck (2001) wrote about swear words:

Such approaches [to classifying swear words] apparently assume that the words have a vulgar meaning in and of themselves… The problem with such efforts is that they have not explored the terms as they are used in daily life and, therefore, have not differentiated the aversive dictionary meanings of the terms from the pragmatics of their use in a particular situation and as part of a larger interaction or relationship… Swearing at someone else could be an expression of disgust on the one hand or a teasing rebuke on the other, and so could have different relational and social psychological implications as a result. Swearing with someone else may be a simple indication of relaxation, or informality, and could even demonstrate a shared language and experience of target objects or people. Its function relationally could then be to indicate intimacy as much as to denote the meaning of a particular object. (pp. 65-66)

In that vein, the literature appears to address two major categories of insults: good-natured teasing and serious insults. Teasing has been used to label behavior that is either hostile and malicious or good-natured and humorous (Eder, 1991; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991). In the present study, teasing will refer only to good-natured teasing, whereas malicious and hostile teasing will be addressed in the category of serious insults.

Good-natured teasing. Kowalski (2001) defines good-natured teasing as “funny, not overly threatening to the target, and fairly straightforward in its intent” (p. 180). Good-natured teasing generally takes place in the context of an intimate relationship (Kowalski, 2001) as a form of play (Baxter, 1992), a way of alerting targets to social violations (e.g., deviant behavior, character, or appearance) (Feinberg, 1996; Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998; Kowalski, 2001), a way of establishing or reinforcing hierarchy (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997), a
way of demonstrating belonging in a group (Giles & Coupland, 1991; Goffman, 1959), or as a way of demonstrating and deepening intimacy (Baxter, 1992; Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997; Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994). More boys than girls and more men than women report using teasing to enhance bonds in relationships (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998; Tannen, 1990). Eder (1991) described the ambiguity of teasing humor as “a safe way to communicate liking and solidarity as well as a way to develop group specific meanings and characterizations that are difficult for outsiders to interpret” (p. 182).

Some cultures and subcultures have also developed insult rituals in which the exchange of insults becomes a game. For example, “razzing” among Native American people to determine degree of belonging in Native culture, and “verbal duels” among predominantly male North American youth (Kowalski, 2001). Both types of games involve an audience judging the appropriateness, creativity, and humor of the insults, and generating energy for the game (Schwebel, 1997). Another frequently referenced insult game is “playing the dozens,” a custom in some African-American (predominantly urban) communities. Labov (1972), Garner (1983), and Bruhn and Murray (1985) documented these games in some detail. Playing the dozens shares the structure, ritual, and audience of the previously described games, but appears to have a greater element of hostility or aggression than the other games (Garner, 1983).

Target response. In teasing and in insult games, the target’s response is a key element in setting the tone of the tease.

When adolescents responded [to a tease] in a playful manner they provided part of the context which identifies the activity as a playful one. By doing so they, in turn, become the focus of positive rather than negative attention. (Eder, 1991, p. 190)

The desired response in insult games is a witty comeback that earns laughs from the audience while keeping one’s cool (Bruhn & Murray, 1985; Eder, 1991; Garner, 1983; Schwebel, 1997). In contrast, a serious, defensive response to a preliminary teasing insult results in a more serious tone and curtails a playful exchange. It is seen as important in all insult games to defend oneself (particularly one’s masculinity), preferably with humor, and without revealing that one’s identity was ever threatened.

*Serious insults.* Good-natured teasing and serious insults (called “serious ridicule” by Eder, 1991) have little in common. In contrast to the bonding functions of teasing, serious insults are more often, “the deliberate use of denigratory and offensive terms to insult enemies” (Winters & Duck, 2001 p. 61). Serious insults can express prejudices, release anger, depersonalize targets, and reinforce social structures (Allen, 1984; Hughes, 1991;
Valentine, 1998; Winters & Duck, 2001). Shapiro, Baumeister, and Kessler (1991) found that third and fifth grade children used serious insults in retaliation for being (maliciously) teased, to express dislike, to express a bad mood, and when participating in a group that was teasing. Sagarin (1962) and Valentine (1998) argued that insults occur more frequently in a context of “differentiation and intergroup conflict,” as when racial or ethnic groups are in close quarters (Sagarin, 1962, p. 39). Sagarin described a circular process in which a majority group member insults and disparages a minority group member, and the minority group member retaliates with equally vehement insults against the majority. Thus, insults contribute to and fuel segregating and competitive forces, and become integrated into groups’ social identities (Thurlow, 2001; Valentine, 1998).

Target response. Sometimes serious insults are used to provoke a physical fight or to make the target lose face by showing too much emotion (Bruhn & Murray, 1985; Plummer, 1999). At times, targets respond as expected to a serious insult with another serious insult or with a physical assault. Other times, especially when the insult is perpetrated by strangers who pose no immediate physical threat, targets of serious insults simply ignore the insult (Leets, 2002; Nielsen, 2002).

Insult words as empowerment. Aside from teasing and serious use of insults, historically abusive terms may be used in a positive way.

African-American informal speech permits the use of “the n-word” as a familiar term between members of the group but reacts to the term as a racial slur when spoken by a white person… It is our belief that a behavior that is normally aversive or abusive can be given a different connotation by the relational circumstances of its production and can, in turn, produce different relational meaning. (Winters & Duck, 2001, p. 72)

Giles and Coupland (1991) identify reclamation of abusive terms as a social creativity strategy (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that resists and challenges marginalization (Valentine, 1998). Sexual orientation-related examples would include LGB use of the words queer, fag, and dyke. Being an in-group member is a vital criterion for empowered use of insulting terms; use of these terms by people trying to establish themselves as “cool” (as in a heterosexual person attempting to use fag in a positive way, or a white person using the term nigga with African-American friends) is generally rejected by the in-group and seen as unacceptable (Conley, Calhoun, Evett, & Devine, 2001). It is because of this ability to use insults in an empowering way that I have chosen in this study to refer to SOI’s rather than homophobic insults, and race-related insults rather than racist insults. The terms themselves are not inherently homophobic or racist, and are context-dependent for their meanings.
Sexual Orientation and Gender Role-Related Insults

Thurlow’s (2001) participants listed 590 SOI’s (10% of all insults listed in the study), which Thurlow described as “strikingly large, especially given that looser analytic categories…accommodated a wide range of common, socially generic abusive labels. The homophobic items, by contrast, exclusively indexed a single social group” (p. 29). Participants also identified SOI’s as worst significantly less frequently than race-related insults. Boys in the study listed more SOI’s than girls, and identified them as “worst” more than girls. Thurlow did not collect any information on use or targets of these terms. Several other studies, however, address the meaning and use of SOI’s and GRI’s based on the presumed sexual orientation of the target.

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Targets. There is substantial literature addressing SOI use (and other aggressive acts) towards LGB targets. LGB people report being victims of verbal abuse at high rates. In studies conducted in the United States, Britain, and Australia, no less than 52% of surveyed LGB participants reported being verbally harassed and insulted (Herek & Berrill, 1992; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995; Plummer, 1999; Smith, 1998). Indeed, in several studies, more than 85% (up to 91%) of participants reported experiencing sexual orientation-related verbal harassment (Herek & Berrill, 1992). As additional evidence of pervasive verbal harassment, Malaney, Williams, and Geller (1997) found that more than 60% of students at two universities had heard derogatory comments about LGB students. Twenty-three percent of participants in Franklin’s (2000) study of community college students admitted they had “call[ed] homosexuals by insulting names” (p. 345), and 38% reported that they would “verbally insult or physically assault a homosexual who flirted with or propositioned them” (p. 353).

College campuses across the country have undertaken “campus climate studies” related to LGB populations. More than 50 have made their reports available to the public (Miller, 2000). Most of the reports concluded that their campuses were at the least unwelcoming, and in some cases hostile, for LGB students (e.g., D’Augelli, 1989). Most LGB students, regardless of their campus, reported that name-calling and hearing anti-lesbian or –gay slurs were common parts of their campus experiences (e.g., Chancellor’s Advisory Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues, 1997).

A significant component of serious SOI use is the perception that LGB people (gay men, in particular) do not follow proscribed gender roles; indeed, strong adherence to traditional masculine gender role and values is linked to higher levels of sexual orientation prejudice (Black & Stevenson, 1984; Krulewitz & Nash, 1980; Parrott,
Adams, & Zeichner, 2002; Sinn, 1997; Stark, 1991; Truman, Tokar, & Fischer, 1996). The centrality of traditional conceptions of masculinity to SOI use is further evidenced in the documented teasing and serious uses among heterosexual men.

**Heterosexual Targets.** Two researchers have examined SOI use towards presumed heterosexual targets (this presumption of heterosexuality is pervasive, and is a component of heterosexism as described by Herek, 2000). Armstrong (1997) conducted a study at the State University of New York to describe the social context and meaning of SOI use. Student researchers collected data on instances of SOI’s around campus, and found that these insults were usually used by young, white men in situations where the target was not believed to be gay.

The usage is based on the linkage of some act or object to presumed attributes of homosexuals. Thus, this type of usage amounts to a connotative extension of the culturally based schema defining homosexuality to the referent. (Armstrong, 1997, p. 327)

The most typical use of SOI’s was to refer to any person or thing that was “uncool” or of which the insulter disapproved. Armstrong reported that the specifically targeted uncool behavior was often a refusal to join in a “homosocial activity” (p. 329; i.e., a social activity in which only one sex is present, such as in a football game).

Plummer (1999, 2001) studied meanings of SOI’s (faggot and poofyer, in particular) as the meaning had evolved over participants’ lives. Plummer (2001, p. 18) found that SOI’s included all of the following meanings:

- being a baby
- being soft, weak, and timid
- being slow to mature physically
- acting like a girl
- being academic and studious
- being special
- being artistic
- appearing different
- not integrating with peer culture, being an outcast or loner
- not conforming to peer expectations
- not participating in prestigious team sports
- conforming too closely to adult expectations at the expense of peer group loyalty
- sexual orientation

Plummer (1999) argues that SOI’s “target men who aren’t obviously effeminate, and transgression seems to occur when same-sex gender conventions are not observed rather than when characteristics of the ‘opposite’ sex are expressed” (p. 8). He further argues that homophobia arises because of its function in heterosexual masculinity and that the real target of homophobia may not actually be gay men: “If homosexual males are a small and stereotypically ‘weak’ minority, then the extent of homophobia in this culture and the amount of energy put into it
seem disproportionate” (Plummer, 1999, p. 10). Plummer’s participants linked SOI’s to GRI’s, noting the similarities between *faggot/poofter* and “pansy… girlie… sissy, nancy, weak, and wuss” (pp. 60-61).

Sagarin argued that the very use of a taboo or swear word (such as an SOI) can demonstrate masculinity and “freedom from taboos” (Sagarin, 1962, p. 142). The link of SOI’s and GRI’s to the acceptable boundaries of traditional masculinity is so strong that I found no studies of SOI or GRI use towards heterosexual women. Thorne (1993) does briefly address the term *tomboy*, but writes, “Although it sometimes has a derogating edge, it often purports to be a compliment” (p. 115).

**Response to and Impact of Sexual Orientation and Gender Role-Related Insults**

*LGB Targets.* Impact. LGB people’s responses to SOI’s and GRI’s are complex, with demographic characteristics, degree of visibility as an LGB person (either through openness or through meeting societal stereotypes), degree of connection to an LGB community, and personal history all impacting a target’s response. For example, about one-third of LGB high school students who were not open about their sexual orientations reported that they hid their sexual orientation due to verbal harassment of visible LGB students at school (Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995). Other students reported avoiding places and situations where they might be targeted, and avoiding other LGB students to avoid harassment. Remafedi (1987) reported that 28% of LGB high school students who were verbally harassed dropped out of high school. Further, he reported that LGB students were at higher risk than heterosexual students for failure, suicide, depression, poor self-esteem, substance abuse, physical victimization, and sexually transmitted diseases (Remafedi, 1987). In a more recent study, Bontempo and D’Augelli (2002) found that those negative risks were tied to level of victimization, specifically with verbal insults, property damage, and/or physical assault. Suicide attempters were more likely to have been victimized than nonattempters. The researchers identified youths in high and low victimization groups, and found that LGB youths in the high victimization group had greater health risk behavior than those in the low victimization group (who were similar to heterosexual peers in health risk behavior). These findings are part of a large-scale study (9,188 9th to 12th grade students, of whom 315 were identified as LGB) of youth risk behaviors in Massachusetts and Vermont. The authors cautioned that student reports of victimization are likely underestimates, as the most frequently victimized students were more likely to be absent (or to have dropped out) from school.

Armstrong (1997) argued that, unlike physically identifiable stigmatized groups, “gays and lesbians are not particularly identifiable, [so] their presence does not constrain the usage of derogatory terminology” (p. 332). Thus,
those LGB people who are not open about their sexual orientation are more vulnerable to hearing derogatory SOI use.

...[H]e who passes leaves himself open to learning what others "really" think of persons of his kind, both when they do not know they are dealing with someone of his kind and when they start out not knowing but learn part way through the encounter and sharply veer to another course. (Goffman, 1963, p. 84)

LGB people are thus faced with a dilemma: hiding sexual orientation has been associated with feelings of alienation, dishonesty, frustration, shame, and hopelessness (Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995; Goffman, 1963), while disclosure of sexual orientation may result in victimization.

Despite the undeniably negative consequences of LGB victimization, Smith (1998) found that sexual orientation-related harassment and coercion play a role in accomplishing a “gay consciousness” (p. 313) among LGB students. Smith’s participants “knew they were ‘different’ early in life, but that entering the ideology of ‘fag’ during their high school years identified and shaped their consciousness of difference” (p. 322). Once students were able to connect to the politically and socially supportive networks of LGB communities, coping with verbal victimization became easier (Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 1990).

Target responses. When an LGB person is the target of “hate speech”, she or he may feel angry, fearful, disgusted, sad, or shamed (Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 1990; Goffman, 1963; Leets, 2002; Nielsen, 2002). Nielsen (2002) found that targets made fast judgments regarding “body language, location, mode of transportation, and age… in order to assess how serious a threat the speaker poses…” (p. 274). Most participants in Nielsen’s (2002) and Leets’ (2002) studies chose to ignore hateful comments. Nielsen attributes this silence to fear: “Although women might consider responding with a resounding, ‘Hey buddy, screw you!’… many fear this could escalate the situation” (p. 273). Leets found similar reports among her participants, but a majority of her participants identified silence “as taking the moral high ground” (p. 38). Many of these participants attributed verbal harassment to ignorance or “repressed hostility” in the harasser, and felt the harasser was not worth their time.

Heterosexual targets. Armstrong (1997) described a positive and affirming response to teasing SOI use among heterosexual men. In one particular example, Armstrong felt a student called him a homo because “he was telling me that he liked me” (p. 331). However, identification of negative consequences of SOI use among heterosexual men is more common in the literature.

Thurlow (2001) hypothesized that men in his study found SOI’s to be among the worst insults because “they are very aware of how reputation-damaging these pejoratives can be… they fear being the recipient of such
abuse precisely because they regard [LGB] people so poorly” (p. 35). SOI’s enforce conformity in groups of men, even when individual men may wish to deviate from a group norm; men conform to avoid homophobic labeling, thus SOI’s restrict heterosexual men’s behavior (Armstrong, 1997; Herek, 1991; Plummer, 1999, 2001). Plummer (1999) argues that boys avoid any association with homosexuality or “different” behavior because they “fear being different and attracting homophobia rather than fearing homosexuality per se, and it is only later when homosexuality is incorporated into concepts of otherness that boys become averse to it too” (p. 150). Being labeled with an SOI may create a need to retaliate with attacks on the masculinity of other group members, creating a cyclical need to prove one’s masculinity (Armstrong, 1997; Gough, 2002; Plummer, 1999).

Instead of simply being heterosexual, it is important to generate evidence of heterosexual activity for the scrutiny of peers and to denounce homosexuality. [T]his has as much, if not more, to do with avoiding being homophobically labeled as it does with being heterosexual… [Thus] boys' heterosexual talk takes the form of a repetitive, almost obsessive practice. (Plummer, 1999, p. 272-273).

**Summary**

The uses and meanings of insults have only rarely been the subjects of formal study. The literature on the functions of teasing is better established, though the field suffers from a confusion regarding what constitutes teasing (good-natured versus malicious). Additionally, much of the teasing literature focuses on children, young adolescents, or adult friendship groups rather than college students.

In contrast, use of SOI’s towards LGB people has been documented for many years. Most authors, however, have focused their articles on more acute incidents of harassment, such as threats and physical assaults. Thus, much of the literature contains clinical observations and hypothetical consequences of SOI’s for LGB people. A qualitative approach to the experience of SOI’s among LGB people provides the opportunity for a non-clinical population to describe their experiences. In addition, conducting a focus group provides the opportunity to directly observe coping mechanisms at the group level.

The two studies that have examined SOI use towards heterosexual men have significant limitations in their studies. Armstrong’s (1997) study details only five incidents of SOI use. Plummer (1999, 2001) studied 30 men in Australia, and some of the terms he focused on (e.g., *poofier, wanker*) do not translate to use in the United States.

The present study aims to address the gaps in the literature through multiple data sources, including heterosexual students, LGB students, field data collection around campus, and media data collection. These sources were used to address the following research questions:
1) What insults do Midwestern college students know and use, and what characteristics affect their insult knowledge?

2) How do participants’ insult lists compare to their descriptions of insult use in their interviews (i.e., do they list them because they use them)? How do participants’ reports of their insult use compare to the insults collected around campus and from the media?

3) What are the social rules surrounding insult use, including what variables impact target choice, word choice, and target responses?

4) What affects participants’ choices of whether to use SOI’s and/or GRI’s? For those who use SOI’s and GRI’s, what do they mean and what are the social rules governing their use? For those who do not use SOI’s or GRI’s, what affects their decision? How does SOI and/or GRI use compare to participants’ attitudes, values, and beliefs?

5) How do LGB and heterosexual students respond when they are targeted with an SOI or GRI?

6) How does the SOI intent of heterosexual students compare to LGB students’ responses to SOI’s? How well do LGB students understand heterosexual SOI use, and conversely, how well do heterosexual students understand LGB responses to SOI use?
Chapter 2

Method

The present study addresses the issue of SOI use from multiple angles and using a variety of data collection methods, including: 1) interviews and insult lists, 2) field insult data collection, 3) media insult data collection, and, 4) focus groups. Though each of these components could have served as a complete research project on its own, the combination of methods works towards the goal of crystallization: “a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic” (Richardson, 2000, p. 934). All aspects of this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cincinnati.

Interview & Insult List Procedures

Interviews were conducted to explore in depth participants’ decision-making processes on whether to use insults, and for those who used insults, how they used them.

Participants. Interviews were conducted and insult lists gathered between May 2002 and February 2003. Participants were 72 students recruited from the Introduction to Psychology participant pool at a large, urban, Midwestern university (75 students participated, but data from three participants were lost due to recording equipment failures). The 72 participants were each categorized into one of the following groups: 18 African-American women, 15 African-American men, 15 white women, 15 white men, one biracial man, three non-native English speaking women (from Russia, Puerto Rico, and Japan), and seven non-native English speaking men (from Japan, Venezuela, Malaysia, “Africa,” Lithuania, Columbia, and Greece).

The mean age of participants was 20.53 (range 18-32), with 2.16 years of college (range ½ year to 5 years). The majority of participants were raised in suburban environments (54.2%), with the remainder from urban (37.5%) and rural (5.6%) environments (2.8% did not complete the question). Participants self-identified their religions as Catholic (26.4%), another denomination of Christian (including “Christian,” Presbyterian, Methodist, A.M.E., Latter-Day Saints, and Baptist) (50%), Jewish (2.8%), or no religion (20.8%). About half (52.8%) of participants reported no religious service attendance. For those who did attend services (N=35), the average was 2.61 services attended per month (range=.25-10, Med=2.25). All but two identified as heterosexual (one identified as bisexual, the other as gay).

There were no significant differences between sex and race groups of participants (excluding the non-native English speakers and biracial participant due to the small number of participants in those categories) in age,
years in college, whether they identified a religion, or whether they attended religious services. There was a significant difference between participants based on the environment in which they grew up: the vast majority of white students were raised in suburban or rural environments (86.7%), whereas African-American students were more evenly divided between urban (51.6%) and suburban (48.4%) environments, $\chi^2 (3, N=61) = 12.86, p=.005$.

Another significant difference is that the majority of white students identified as Catholic (53.3%), whereas the majority of African-American participants identified as Baptist (41.9%) or Christian (32.3%), $\chi^2 (3, N=61) = 27.95, p = .000$.

**Procedure.** Interview participants were first given a consent form, demographics questionnaire, and insult list form. The insult list form read, “Please list every word you know to insult someone. This can include words you have used, words you have heard someone else use, or words you just know. Write as many as you can think of.” At the bottom of the page, it read, “Now, please mark the 5 WORST insults with a *.” These instructions were also stated verbally to the participant when they were given the paperwork. If the participant spent more than 10 or so minutes completing this page, the researcher stopped the participant, and began the interview. Interviews were all conducted by the researcher, tape recorded, and lasted approximately one hour. Table 2.1 is the interview guide.

**Insult list categorization procedure.** As shown in Table 2.2, the researcher identified 13 categories of insults and picked prototypical examples, based in part on Thurlow (2001). The researcher and five research assistants then independently coded all of the insults from the interview participants’ lists. Most insults were easily categorized in this way, with agreement from all coders; 42 insults were either unknown to the coders or were coded differently between coders. For those insults, research assistants looked up disputed insults in a slang dictionary (e.g., Chapman, 1998; Jarvis & Thomson, 2003; Partridge, 1990; Urbandictionary, 2003) and in interview transcripts to see if the participant had defined the insult in her or his interview. Based on that information, each research assistant picked an insult category. For most insults, this second process resulted in consensus; for the remaining disputed insults, the researcher picked a final category based on the combined definitions presented by research assistants.

**Interview coding procedure.** After the interviews were complete, they were transcribed. Transcribers included the researcher, several research assistants, and a professional transcriber. For those interviews that were not transcribed by the researcher, the transcript went through an additional accuracy check by the researcher before finalizing and coding the transcript.
Using a qualitative data-coding program and a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992), the researcher then conducted an initial coding process. Each interview transcript was first coded for each participant demographic characteristic (all listed above). Each sentence of each transcript was then coded for reference to social rules related to insults (1 category of coding), and/or reference to insults or social rules in any of the 13 insult categories listed in Table 2.2. Notes on reviewed literature were also entered into the program, and coded for the same 14 variables. After that, each of the 14 code groups was treated separately, and a subtree coding system developed for each variable.

Field Insult Data Collection Procedure

As the interviews were proceeding, several participants made strong statements about never using insult words in public, or around anyone who might be offended by their uses of identity-related insults or swear words. To further elaborate on these findings, ten research assistants (all undergraduate students) collected data on and around campus over the course of two quarters (Winter and Spring quarters, 2003). The data collection sites included waiting spaces outside computer labs or classrooms, in bars just off campus, in dining areas on and off campus, in group study areas at libraries, in a movie theater, at work, at fraternity meetings, eating with friends, and at university-sponsored events. Assistants took note of what insults they heard, the gender of the speaker, the social context and location, and whether the insult appeared to be said in a teasing or serious tone.

This exercise proved quite difficult, as research assistants frequently could not get close enough to groups of students to hear the insults they were using. This reinforced the reports of interview participants that they usually use taboo insults in the privacy of their friendship groups. The fact that research assistants were still able to gather data on 24 occasions, however, also suggests that friendship groups, and the social space surrounding them, are frequently not as private as their participants may think. To further examine this phenomenon, on 12 occasions research assistants noted the insults used by their friends and co-workers (with their permission) as they talked with each other.

It is clear that these data are neither random, nor representative. I present them as a supplement to the other data collection methods, to compare and contrast with what one might expect, and to further elaborate on statements made by interview participants.
Media Insult Data Collection Procedure

As it became clear that the field data insult collection was more difficult and less representative than had been hoped, the media component was added. Eight research assistants and the researcher collected data on insults from the top 30 grossing films of 2002 (listed in Table 2.3), and the 20 top-rated television shows for the season of September 2002 to June 2003 (listed in Table 2.4). Early in data collection, two research assistants were assigned to each show or film, so results could be compared. When it was clear that two research assistants were recording consistent and accurate results, each show or film was watched by only one research assistant or the researcher. We took note of what insults were used, the gender of the speaker and the target, and whether the insult appeared to be said in a teasing or serious tone. These insults were coded in the same manner as the other insult list data (by the categories listed in Table 2.2), the results of which are described in Chapter 3.

One final portion of the media insult data collection was added late in the process. Several interview participants mentioned the TV show Southpark as a source for learning about insults. Therefore, a research assistant watched three episodes of this show in May 2003, the researcher coded the insults, and they are reported alongside the other media insult data in Chapter 3.

Focus Group Procedures

Two focus groups were conducted in May 2003 to elaborate on the experience of sexual orientation-related insults on campus.

Participants. The focus groups included seven LGB students. They were recruited by flyers posted throughout campus, e-mails to the university’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Straight Alliance (LGBTSA) listserv, an announcement made by the researcher at an LGBTSA meeting, e-mail to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning Programming Coordinator at the University’s Women’s Center (which was then distributed to his listserv), flyers given to the psychology intern facilitating a support group for LGB students, and announcements in psychology classes.

Of the seven participants, two were white lesbians, two were white gay men, one was a white bisexual woman, one was a Chinese-American lesbian, and one was an Indian gay man. The mean age of participants was 21 (range 19-23), with 3.21 years of college (range 2 to 5 years). Four participants were raised in suburban environments, and three in urban environments. Participants self-identified their religions as agnostic (1 participant), none (2 participants), Hindu (1 participant), Christian (1 participant), Episcopalian (1 participant), and
Wiccan (1 participant). Five participants reported no religious service attendance. The two who did attend services attended 3-4 times per month.

Procedure. Focus group participants were first given a consent form and a demographics questionnaire. As these were completed, participants were paid $10 for their participation. Both focus groups were conducted by the researcher, were tape recorded, and lasted about 1 hour. In addition, one to two research assistants attended each session as note-takers. The recordings were transcribed by the researcher, and coded in the same manner as the individual interviews. Table 2.5 is the focus group interview guide.
Table 3.1 lists the frequency of insults in each of the 13 coding categories for each data collection method. (Appendix A lists all of the insults for every category.) For all three forms of insult data collection, Social-Personality insults were by far the most commonly included. Race-Ethnicity insults occurred much less frequently in the field and media data than on participants’ insult lists. SOI’s were a much higher percentage of field data insults than of media or participant insult lists. Physicality insults accounted for the second largest proportion of media insults, but were nearly absent in the field data.

**Participant Insult Lists**

Overall, the 72 interview participants generated 1,453 insults, a mean of 20.18 insults (range 6-67, SD 13.31). Despite some previous reports (Hughes, 1991; Kutner & Brogan, 1974) of sex differences in insult and expletive use, there were no significant differences in number of insults generated by sex or by any other demographic characteristic. The 20 most frequently listed insults by interview participants are listed in Table 3.2. These insults account for 40% of the insults listed by interview participants.

The **10 most frequent insults by sex and race groupings**. Table 3.3 shows the 10 most frequently listed insults for African-American women and men, and white women and men (the non-native English speakers were not included in this table due to the small numbers of participants in this category). There were a number of significant differences by race and sex groupings. Men listed four insults significantly more frequently than women: ass (men 69.4%, women 47.2%; z = -1.91, p=.028), fag (men 69.4%, women 41.7%; z[N=72]=-2.37, p=.009), pussy (men 38.9%, women 11.1%; z[N=72]=2.722, p=.003), and gay (men 33.3%, women 13.9%; z[N=72]=-1.942, p=.026). Women listed ugly significantly more frequently than men (women 52.8%, men 27.8%, z[N=72]=2.163, p=.015).

Participants of color (POC; this included non-native English speakers who were not white) listed two insults significantly more frequently than white participants: nigger (POC 89.5%, white 54.6%, z[N=72]=2.457, p=.007) and cracker (POC 34.2%, white 12.1%, z[N=72]=2.175, p=.015).

Each sex-race grouping had significant variability in their listings of specific insults, although white men showed greater consensus in their lists than the other groups. All groups showed strong consensus at the top of their frequent insult lists (ranging from 81% to 100% of the group listing that specific word). However, consensus diminished quickly for all but white men. Fifty-three percent or more of white men listed 14 specific insults (in
addition to the 10 listed in Table 3.3, 53-60% also listed fat, dick, nigger, and variations of shit. Fifty-four percent or more of both African-American women and African-American men listed seven insults, and 53% or more of white women listed nine insults. Thus, white men agreed on about twice as many insults as the other sex-race groupings.

**Insult categories by sex and race groupings.** The GRI category appears to be quite closely related to the SOI category, such that 18 of the 21 participants who listed at least one GRI had listed at least one SOI. Men listed significantly more insults in these two categories than women (men $\chi^2=2.78$, women $\chi^2=1.40$; $t(69, 72)=2.90$, $p=.002$). Though there were differences between participants of color and white participants in the number of Race/Ethnicity insults listed, these differences did not reach significance (POC $\chi^2=3.38$, white $\chi^2=2.55$; $t(70,72)=1.04$, $p=.150$). There were no other significant differences between sex or race groups.

**Insults rated worst.** Table 3.4 lists the ten insults rated worst by interview participants (along with their variations), and the use of these insults in the media and field data. All but one of these (variations of fuck) are among the 20 most frequently listed insults (Table 3.2). The worst insults accounted for a small portion (10.4%) of media insults, but a larger portion (39.3%) of the field data insults ($z=-10.64$, $p=.000$). Bitch and stupid (and their variations) accounted for the largest percentage of the worst insults used in media and in field data. Though fag (and its variations) was quite rare in the media, it was the third most commonly used worst insult in the field data ($z=-5.80$, $p=.000$). It is also important to note that, while bitch is coded in the category Insults for Women, 15 of 27 media uses were directed towards men. The field data were not consistently coded for sex of target, but for the eight uses of bitch in which the target was coded, four were targeted at men. The three episodes of Southpark included 15 uses of insults designated as worst (out of 84 total insults), including bitch (3 of 5 times towards men), stupid, hoe, retard, and fat.

**Worst insult categories.** Table 3.5 shows the frequency of worst insults by insult category. Nearly 44% of Race/Ethnicity insults were designated as worst. Approximately 30% each of Insults for Women and SOI’s were designated as worst. Table 3.6 shows the frequency of worst ranking for specific terms by sex-race groups. SOI’s were rated worst less frequently by African-American women than by the other sex-race groups, though the difference was not quite significant (Fisher’s Exact Probability Test, $p=.08$). Race/Ethnicity insults were rated worst significantly more frequently by African-American participants than white participants (African-American 36.3% of worst insults, white 21.3% of worst insults, $z=2.89$, $p=.001$), though white participants also listed fewer
Race/Ethnicity insults and thus had fewer available to rate as worst. When comparing the ranking of *nigger* with *fag*, African-American women and men and white women rated *nigger* as worst with significantly greater frequency than *fag*; in contrast, white men rated nigger and fag as worst with nearly equal frequency ($\chi^2 [3, N=61]=21.24, p=.000$; Cramer’s $V=.23$).

**Field Insult Data Collection**

Research assistants gathered insult data on 36 occasions, collecting 317 insults. There were two major categories of field insults: those overhead being used in a group near the research assistant (24 occasions, 187 insults) and those being used in a group of the research assistants’ friends or co-workers (12 occasions, 130 insults). Table 3.7 lists the most frequent insults heard during field data collection; these 12 insults account for 55% of the field data insults. Only two of these insults, *douche(bag)* and *fucker*, do not appear in Table 3.2, the most frequently listed insults by participants. Seven of the 12 insults also appear in Table 3.4, the worst insults.

**Tone.** The field data added a dimension that was not available on the insult lists: the tone with which the insult was used. Table 3.8 shows each insult category with the percent of serious versus teasing uses. The most frequent serious and teasing insults were clustered in Insults for Women, Social-Personality insults, and SOI’s. Serious insults also were frequent in the Scatological category; teasing insults were also frequent in the Intelligence/Lack Thereof category. Though men publicly used more insults than women did, ($N=196$ vs. $N=122$), the proportions of serious vs. teasing were almost identical (approximately 20% serious to 80% teasing for both). Men used SOI’s significantly more frequently than women did (men 19.9% of their insults, women 5.7% of their insults, $z=3.49, p=.000$). There were no other significant differences between women and men in the insults used.

**Insults in Movies and TV Shows**

Overall, the 30 movies and 20 TV shows included 655 insults. Table 3.9 shows the mean insults for each type of media used. Movie comedies used significantly more insults than did movie dramas; TV comedies were half the length of dramas (30 minutes vs. 60 minutes), but had nearly as many insults for each show. To be able to compare across types and lengths of shows, the number of insults per minute was calculated per show, then compared; the difference between comedies and dramas was significant (comedies $X=.23$ insults per minute, dramas $X=.15$ insults per minute, $t(45, N=47)=1.78, p=.041$). If the film *8 Mile*, which accounted for 10% of all drama insults (66 insults), is removed from the analysis, the difference is more pronounced, (dramas $X=.13$,
The show *Southpark* is also presented in Table 3.9 for comparison, with nearly 5 times the mean insults of the mainstream popular shows included in the analysis.

Table 3.10 shows the ten most frequently used insults in movies and TV shows. Together, these 10 insults account for 22% of all media insults. Three of these are in the top 10 worst insults, and six of the insults listed in this table appeared among the 20 most frequently listed insults by interview participants (see Table 3.3). Note, however, that the film *8 Mile* again heavily influenced the results, such that *dog* would not be on the list at all, and *bitch* would have been listed fourth. If *8 Mile* were removed from the list, *creep, jerk, fool*, and *moron* would have tied for tenth on the list, each with six uses (0.9% each).
**Tone.** Table 3.8 shows the tone of insults used in media data. In the exact reverse pattern of the field data, approximately 80% of media insults were serious, compared to 20% teasing. Social-Personality insults dominated both teasing and serious media insults. For teasing insults, Physicality and Insults for Men came in a distant tie for second, with less than one-third the uses each. For serious insults, Physicality and Intelligence / Lack Thereof insults were ranked second and third.

**Media insults and gender.** Women used fewer insults than men (N=160 vs. N=495), and when they did use insults a greater proportion were directed towards men (58.1%) than women (35.6%). Men also directed a far greater proportion of insults towards men (79.4%) than women (14.9%). Women and men used insults at about the same frequency as they were insulted (insults directed at women, N=130, insults directed at men, N=484). There were no significant differences between women and men in their uses of tone, both using about 20% teasing and 80% serious. There were also no differences by target of the insult, such that insults targeting women and men each had the same 20% teasing to 80% serious ratio as all media insults.

**Discussion**

**Overall findings.** The analysis of participant insults was modeled after Thurlow (2001), so the results will be compared and contrasted with those findings. In the present study, participants listed more insults than the 14 and 15 year-olds in Thurlow’s study (X=20.18 vs. X=15.80). In addition, the categories of insults listed were proportionally different. In the present study, participants included nearly equal numbers of Race/Ethnicity insults (14.9%) and Insults for Women (14%), and about half as many as each of those for SOI’s (7.8%). This is in contrast to Thurlow’s participants who listed more insults for women (28%) than SOI’s (10%), and fewer still race/ethnicity insults (7%).

The addition of the field and media data to Thurlow’s insult list format shows the limitations of this data collection method. On the insult lists, 65% of participants listed at least one SOI, suggesting they are widely known. However, there is an apparent taboo against use of these words in the mainstream media (1.8% of insults used). The field data demonstrated acceptance of sexual orientation insults (14.5% of insults used) in the college student peer groups we studied. In contrast, 72% of participants listed at least one Race/Ethnicity insult, demonstrating that they are as widely known as SOI’s. However, Race/Ethnicity insults appeared at approximately equal (low) frequencies in the field and media data, suggesting a widely agreed upon taboo compared to SOI’s.
In their interviews, a number of participants stated that they learned the insults on their lists from “the media.” This assertion may have some truth, but the rare appearance of SOI’s and Worst insults in the media versus field data versus participant lists suggests not. Only 10% of the media insults were on the list of Worst insults. *Southpark* offered more insult options than the mainstream media, with 21% of the words being on the list of Worst insults. In contrast, 39% of the field insults were on the participants’ Worst lists. Thus, it seems more likely that use of insult words is related to in-group socialization and peer culture. Perhaps *Southpark* is an example of a combination of the media with an in-group phenomenon. This show is targeted to high school and college students, and peer groups may watch this, and shows like it, as a group activity. Thus, the language that identifies the peer group may be both reinforced and set by media choices. Indeed, several participants referred to *Southpark* as a source of insult ideas, for example:

…uncle fucker… that was recently introduced from *Southpark*. I thought it was a really funny word so I might even say it to a friend sometimes, like, “Shut up, uncle fucker!” ‘Cause it’s just silly. (Laura: 26 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 19 insults)

There is an interesting change in insult tone from field data to media data, such that field data was 20% serious and 80% teasing, and media data was 80% serious and 20% teasing. In part, this may be due to the social situations available to research assistants in the field. They were able to hear friends talking with each other in public places only, places where fighting is unusual and socially unacceptable. In contrast, TV shows and films show high levels of drama that are presumably more private or unusual (and therefore, interesting).

*Demographic differences.* Men listed more SOI’s and GRI’s than women, but white women considered them worst at a similar rate to men. Thurlow reported that young men listed significantly more sexual orientation-related items, and rated them as taboo significantly more frequently than young women. Thurlow also found that participants of color in his study listed significantly fewer SOI’s than white participants did, which was not the case in the present study. There were differences between participants of color and white participants in listing Race/Ethnicity insults and two specific insults from that category, *nigger* and *cracker*.

As noted previously, white men had more consistency in their insult lists than any other group. The consistency of white men’s lists is a phenomenon that merits further exploration. The collected data do not provide clues as to why white men might have comparatively homogenous insult vocabularies.
Worst insults. Thurlow (2001) notes that SOI’s in his study appeared to be especially vitriolic, with nearly 10 per cent of them occurring as compounds with … words such as fucker, cunt, and twat…. Racist items were at least 60 per cent less likely to appear as compounds in the same way as homophobic items. (pp. 29-30)

This was not the case for the present study. Only two SOI’s had modifiers, and only 10 in the Race/Ethnicity category had modifiers. Additionally, the field and media data showed that SOI’s in the present study were used in a teasing tone at about the same rate as in a serious tone. Further, none of the SOI’s appeared to be directed at someone believed to be gay.

The picture for SOI’s is complex, and differs by demographic groups. For instance, white men rated fag and nigger as Worst with nearly equal frequency. On the other hand, African-American women and men and white women rated nigger as worst significantly more frequently than fag (20 to 50% difference in the number of participants listing the word as worst). For SOI’s, only African-American women rated these insults as worst at a lower rate than they listed the words. The specific meanings and uses of SOI’s are explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

Finally, both women and men insulted men at least twice as often as they insulted women. Men in media used about three times the insults as women, and men in field data used about one and a half times the insults as women. In contrast, on the participant insult lists, there were no significant differences in number of insults by sex. deKlerk (1990) found that boys had a more positive attitude towards slang than girls (though girls and boys in her study listed the same number of slang terms), and that both girls and boys agreed that slang use was more appropriate in boys. She stated:

…girls are apparently socialized into feeling that slang is more fitting for males than females, despite the fact that they use it, and by doing so reveal a need to do so. This conflict of the ideal and the actual can hardly add to their self-image! If society implicitly condones one's use of slang and implicitly approves, one's feelings about oneself in such a situation must be fairly positive. This is the case for males, but not for females, whose attitudes (reinforced by those of the opposite sex) revealed a much more guilty, self-condemnatory, and narrow-minded perception of the issue. (de Klerk, p. 603)

Limitations of the Quantitative Component

The differences between Thurlow’s study and the quantitative portion of the present study highlight the limitations of both. There were significant differences between our populations in terms of geography, age, and racial/ethnic backgrounds (Thurlow’s participants were 60% white, and 30% “Black, Muslim, Asian or Somalian”). In addition, the differing instructions may have resulted in different types lists – the British “slagging someone off”
(which is clearly pejorative) versus this study’s “words you know to insult someone” (which is more ambiguous).

The present study also highlights the importance of having information regarding the tone and the context of the insult used – it is a different thing to be a heterosexual man who is called a *fag* in a teasing tone by a good friend than to be a gay man who is called a *fag* in an angry tone by a stranger.

In addition, the media and field data regarding the word *bitch* highlight one of the problems with categorizing a non-contextual list of insult words. Though *bitch* has traditionally been used as an insult towards women, meaning a spiteful, overbearing, or lewd woman (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000), it has now shifted to include “a man considered to be weak or contemptible” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). This additional meaning for men is similar to definitions interview participants gave of their use of the words *gay* and *fag*, described in Chapter 5. This flexibility of meaning creates a problem in categorizing the word *bitch* as an Insult for Women or as a GRI. Indeed, many of the participants may well have listed *bitch* thinking of both uses. Adding an additional layer of complexity, some insult terms can be used affectionately, or as insider terms, and may not be offensive within a group at all – for instance the reclamation of the words *nigger* (*nigga*) and *queer*. When used as insults, they are clearly offensive, but the words themselves may not be appropriately categorized as insults at all.

Finally, it is clear that the participant insult lists do not represent frequency, use, or values; they represent only cognitive accessibility and knowledge. Both of these are valuable, but serve largely as a jumping off point for the qualitative piece of this study. For instance, this chapter shows that *fag* was commonly known, and was seen as one of the worst insults one could use. The Worst designation seems validated by the rare appearance of *fag* in the media. And yet, it was frequently used in field situations, almost always in a teasing tone. What is the meaning of *fag* when it is used seriously versus when it is used in teasing? When is it okay to tease with this word?
Chapter 4
A Model of Insult Use

Interviews with participants elaborated on the insult lists from Chapter 3. Based on participants’ reports of their insult use (and non-use), I developed a general model (Figure 4.1) that accounts for the variations described by participants. In summary, decisions regarding insult use appear to involve four major components: insulter characteristics, social cues to be read, social cues to be conveyed, and the response of the insult target (and sometimes the audience that witnesses the insult). The characteristics of some participants were such that they never used insult words in any context. For most participants, however, the intersection of their characteristics and the social situation of the moment helped them decide whether to use an insult in that situation. Once a participant decided to use an insult, he or she needed to convey the insult in a situation-appropriate way. The target (and audience) of the insult then responded, providing further information to the participant regarding the rules and values of the specific social situation. After the target response, the insulter had to decide, among other things, whether to insult again, whether to apologize, and whether to take physically defensive actions.

Below, excerpts from participant interviews demonstrate and clarify each of the elements in Figure 4.1. Because they are real-life examples, however, they rarely illustrate a single element of the model; most frequently, they demonstrate an intersection and mutual influence of several elements.

Insulter Characteristics

Insulter characteristics are, perhaps, the simplest element determining insult use or non-use because they operate in a non-social fashion. These characteristics were major determinants for participants who chose to never use insults, regardless of any setting, comfort level, tone, or relational context. There were more than twice as many participants who abstained from serious or angry insults (29 participants from all sex-race groups) than to teasing or joking insults (12 participants from all sex-race groups except African-American men). There were three additional participants who reported very infrequent teasing insult use, one of whom was an African-American man. The insulter characteristics that were most salient for participants who refrained from teasing or joking insults were somewhat different from those who refrained from serious insults.

Gender and age. Previous research showed some differences between women and men in the use of insults and slang. For instance, Armstrong (1997) described insult games as:

[A] form of verbal aggression in which the user mocks the victim, usually to challenge the victim’s authority or to undermine his pretensions. It is characteristically an all-male activity in
which the participants know each other. Still, in current culture, women are allowed to participate, although their participation is contingent on sticking to the male-defined rules of the game. (p. 329)

deKlerk (1991) also found use of expletives to be more common among adolescent men than adolescent women:

The overt, positively reinforced attitude is that swearing is frowned upon. Working against this are covert forces, associating the use of antisocial (taboo) forms with masculine daring. These covert forces are particularly attractive to male adolescents, who need to assert independence from the larger linguistic community by breaking the overt adult taboos and identifying with adolescent subculture. (pp. 164-165).

Other research (deKlerk, 1997; Sutton, 1995; & Thurlow, 2001) found a high prevalence of insult words and slang among all adolescents.

In the present study, the interview data revealed gender and age-related trends, but not rules. Men did more frequently engage in joking insult games and teasing with their friends than women, and older participants reported less enjoyment of the same than did younger ones. These findings are tempered by the fact that many women in the present study swore, used slang, and insulted without hesitation or apparent self-consciousness. Nonetheless, for women who reported that they did not use teasing or joking insults in any circumstance, gender and age (maturity) were salient in their rationales. For example,

It's mainly the guys. The girls don't really do that.... The guys do it to each other, and the guys do it to the girls. The girls are just like, “Shut up.”.... I don't know. I think, like me and my girlfriends are a lot maturer than our guy friends, and we just don't have to do that.... I mean, when I was in junior high, we used to tease about boys, but that was about it. (Stephanie*: 21 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 10 insults)

Several men agreed that women are less likely to enjoy teasing with insults than men. In the next excerpt in particular, the participant highlights the separate nature of women’s and men’s friendship groups – he feels unsure as to what women do together.

[T]he way a lot of guys interact is that.... [t]hey'll just rip on each other all the time. That's how they interact with each other. Whereas girls I am not sure about.... From what I've heard I don't think they do that. (21 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Christian, listed 18 insults)

Participants who used insults, but infrequently, invoked age, but not gender, in their descriptions.

Participants in this group referred to both teasing and serious insults.

It seems like very rarely. I would say I usually almost never instigate it. Maybe I used to a lot more. (Gerald: 23 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 20 insults)

* Participants who are cited more than one time in this document have been assigned a pseudonym to facilitate discussion of their quotations and comparisons across single participants’ quotations. All participant names used in this document are pseudonyms.
I mean, every once in a while, we might say something, but not, like, all the time.... When we say something real silly. We used to insult each other more back in high school. We don't really do that now.... Back then… we were kind of like the bad guys. We were, pretty much, just saying how we feel, so we insulted people…. we've matured I guess. (Tiffani: 19 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 20 insults)

Excerpts in this section suggest that some women and men find insult use to be a poor match with women’s gender roles and interests. Other women may find insults just as useful and entertaining as men, but may outgrow this attitude earlier than their same-age male peers. Indeed, men who were several years older than the sample mean did report less interest than the majority of male participants.

*Upbringing, values, and history.* The majority of participants referenced their family experiences, family values, and school experiences as they related to both teasing and serious insults, but these elements seemed primary only for those participants who did not use (or rarely used) insults in any circumstances. The following excerpts are examples of participants who reported feeling exceptionally sensitive about the meaning or intent of insults based on their experiences.

[I]n the past the damage that names and teasing have done to me… is so significant that I would never do that to someone else. It's just not something you joke with. I understand it when other people say it, but it's just not that way for me. There's other ways you can refer to a person than insulting them. Like, saying their name. (18 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 23 insults)

Sometimes, but I usually feign from it since I’ve gotten some insults, that I just, I don’t like them…. But when I’m doing that, I barely do that anyways, but yeah, it’s usually stuff that’s not overly, stuff that’s extreme, it’s not like that. (19 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 18 insults)

In addition to history, several participants cited specific values related to word use as reasons for refraining from insults. The excerpts below come from participants who identified values as the main factors in their decisions.

I definitely don't do that…. We have a real respect. We might joke around about other stuff, but we won't call each other names…. I don't think that's very respectful. (18 year-old woman, non-native English speaking, Puerto Rican, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 8 insults)

Always have some kind of reasoning, say things for a certain purpose, everything happens for a purpose and its all destined, so I don't see where in my future there's purpose for me to call somebody out their name. And I'm more of a positive person so I don't look at negative things like name calling and things. (19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 25 insults)

I just don’t think it’s necessary. My parents never brought me up like that so I don’t, they always taught me not to talk about people or say things about people, so I just kind of keep it to myself. (Brittany: 22 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 21 insults)
**Self-concept, mood, and goals.** Several participants who refrained from use of serious insults cited self-concept as the primary deterrent for them. In the following excerpts, participants referred to self-concept as the type of person they believed themselves to be.

No, because I'm kind of the type of person that, how do I explain it, I don't, like, insult, and I guess I get more upset and just kind of draw back from that. I'm more of the type of person like, I mostly just cry and I'm so taken over by the hurt that I just kind of shut down. (Joanna: 20 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 20 insults)

I don't really get angry. I'm the type of person that if I get upset I clam up. I just don't say anything because. The way I feel if I'm angry, the more I start talking about it the angrier I get…. I like to pride myself as being a lover, not a fighter. (27 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 10 insults)

For the most part I just try to bite my tongue. I mean, I'm not the kind of person who is just going to shout. What's the point? If it's not life threatening. (25 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 9 insults)

Intersecting with self-concept in the above excerpts are participants’ moods. For instance, participants considered what their roles were when angry and how their self-concepts accommodated anger (if at all). For all three, using angry insults would have been inconsistent with their self-concepts.

Another self-concept theme among non-insulters was distrust in one’s social skills, i.e., one’s ability to properly read and convey social cues. When I was with the participant below, I had difficulty engaging and relating to him.

It's not exactly that it would make me feel uncomfortable, well I mean, yeah, it would. Because I am not good at drawing social delineation there so, I know if I got started trying to jibe back, you know, I might cross one of those lines.... People take things the wrong way when I say them anyhow, so I worry about where the lines are. (21 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 41 insults)

This excerpt demonstrates the above participant’s accurate (based on my experience of him) self-awareness that he has trouble conveying social cues, so he does not even consider insulting and saves himself misunderstandings.

Finally, several non-insulters for whom self-concept was salient also identified the importance of their goals, such as being heard or taken seriously, in preventing insult use.

[Interviewer: If you used an insult word and you weren’t joking?] I don't think I'd do that. That usually turns people off to hearing what you have to say. (21 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Christian, listed 18 insults)

Like, when I get really angry or just annoyed, I don't really, either I don't say anything to the person or I just go and explain my side and, but I don't use any curse words or call any names. I just start telling like, well you did this and I didn't appreciate that, and don't do it again…. Because I think…when people use cuss words, they're just trying to make it more of a bigger deal and they're trying to act like they are more serious. Well, I don't have to use cuss words to be serious,
you know. So, I just tell them what I don't like, and don't do it again. (20 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 13 insults)

Racial and ethnic identities are components of self-concept, though these identities did not appear to be important in decisions to always refrain from insults. Where racial and ethnic identities seemed to gain relevance was in word choice, particularly in identifying symmetrical terms and in determining which words are unacceptable.

The excerpts in this section suggest that self-concept may be a factor that supercedes other insulter characteristics, as all sex-race groups had a least one participant who identified self-concept as her or his primary reason for refraining from insult use. The power of self-concept may be related to the fact that one’s self-concept influences the types of friends one chooses and the situations to which one exposes oneself.

In summary, insulter characteristics sometimes created a stopping point for teasing insults; if a participant had one or more characteristics that made using insults unacceptable or uncomfortable for her, she did not have to consider any other factors listed in Figure 4.1. Other participants expressed a conditional willingness to use insults, so the decision shifted in the model to an intersection of their personal characteristics with reading and conveying social cues.

Social Cues to Read and Convey

Though social cues to read and social cues to convey are listed as separate elements in Figure 4.1, in practice they are difficult to separate. For instance, insulter must gauge what language is considered appropriate in their social situation, and, if they insult, choose insult words that match those standards. Thus, this section describes the social cues to read and to convey simultaneously – in the same way that these elements interacted in participants’ reports.

*Target person(s) and level of formality.* Goffman (1959) described the fact that our language, behavior, deference, and demeanor depend largely on the target and audience in a situation:

> Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his "tough" young friends. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club companions, to our customers as to the laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends. (p. 128)

In the same work, Goffman described frontstage (formal) and backstage (informal) behaviors. For participants in the present study, the options of frontstage and backstage are insufficient to describe the many varieties in between (perhaps frontstage, off-stage, backstage, and at the cast party later are closer to accurate). However, it is clear that, in the present study, insulting comprises an informal behavior. For many participants, the social category of a target
(e.g., parents, friends, strangers) identified the appropriate type of behavior and level of formality with that person. Most identified the target and level of formality as though they were inextricable and did not require explanation. For instance, when asked about using insults with parents or strangers, some participants responded as though the very concept was incomprehensible. For them, the judgment of the inappropriateness of insults with these targets was so automatic that responses were less articulate than other parts of the same participant’s interviews. For example:

[Interviewer: Or, if you were to call your mom or dad that?] Oh, God! [pause] Yeah, I mean, I would never, [nervous laughter] I would never do that, you know. (Nick: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 14 insults)

Nonetheless, many participants made other, contrasting, automatic assumptions about targets in similar categories. Thus, this section addresses each target group separately.

Parents. Participants’ reports of their families provided cogent examples of the relationship between targets and level of formality. The majority of participants (though certainly not all) reported liking and feeling close to their families. However, their reports of teasing and serious insults covered the full range of possibilities – from nearly constant insults to the concept of insulting being unfathomable. The element that seemed to make the difference between these options was the level of formality in the relationships. The following excerpts are from participants who had divorced and remarried parents, and compared teasing and serious insult use between their two households.

No, not my step mom. I really don't have a close relationship per se with my step-mom. It's like she came along and I was already grown. It was a little late, our relationship; we just exchange pleasantries…. My step dad is different…. I've like known him for so long. Yeah, so he’s cool with me. Yeah, I mess around with him sometimes, too. I call him ugly, things like that. [Interviewer: Okay, and your mom?] No, that’s my mommy. (Nathan: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 51 insults)

Like, my step dad is really humorous. He is really funny and sometimes he goes over the line, but you let him know and he apologizes and stuff. Everyone just makes fun of everyone. That's mostly the dinner conversation. Just silly stuff, like poking fun at people. [Interviewer: Do you have the same kind of joking relationship with [your father] and his wife?] Yeah, but, it's. Me and my Dad don't always get along… I would feel really uncomfortable if he were to confront me…. I think that I'm more likely to make fun of and be mean to the people that I like the most and the people that I feel the most comfortable with. Because me and my Mom can go back and forth and I can tell her, “Your hair, Mom.”.... My Mom's the first to tell me, like, “[Name], don't wear that. That's awful.” (Lisa: 19 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)

It's interesting because my Dad's, I would never use like any bad words, like none of them…. [O]nce… I told them to fuck off and like, that was awful. That was not cool at all, so that was the only time I used that…. [N]o, I can't use insults. Because I'm sarcastic but they are very uptight and they don't even understand my sarcasm, so I try to tone it down as much as possible. But then my Mom and my stepdad I can say whatever, and it's cool…. It's like, I have more of a friendship
level with them…. We would insult each other more I guess. Like *The Simpson's* kind of thing, or *Roseanne*…. I use [insults] as in a loving insulting way, you know? Like silly ones, like poop-head. (Lynn: 23 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 67 insults)

Though a sense of closeness frequently went along with a sense of informality (i.e., the closer you are, the less formal you are), this was clearly not always the case (e.g., the participant who feels close to and does not insult his “mommy”). Thus, it is not solely closeness that determines the level of formality.

Some general cultural differences emerged in the level of formality between participants and their parents. Many, though not all, African-American and non-native English-speaking participants found the concept of insults with their parents to be outside the realm of possibility. In particular, several cited past physical consequences for being inappropriately informal (i.e., disrespectful) as a current deterrent.

It’s like trained, I guess, because when we were little, if you cussed you got hit. We got popped, so it’s like, I’m formed to not cuss in front of adults. (18 year-old woman, African-American, rural, heterosexual, no religion, listed 13 insults)

It's just a thing that. I think it's the culture. But, my Dad used to beat the crap out of me. I am really thankful for that because now I'm a good boy… You feel like stupid, you know, when you say something bad in front of them. They don't look at you at all, it's just your feeling inside, you know? (Len: 20 year-old man, non-native English speaker, Lithuanian, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 6 insults)

I’ll go to sleep, she’ll put me to sleep. Mom will hit me… I don’t know, it’s just something internal that tells you like. Around my parents, like if I get mad I can’t cuss, or that person did something wrong to me, I can’t cuss because I know I’m going to get some consequences. (Marcus: 18 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 17 insults)

A few white participants also described formal relationships with their parents, but they did not cite physical consequences as deterrents.

Parents, no, that's like, real bad. I mean, before I'd get in trouble, and now it's just like, I don't want to disrespect them like that. (Josh: 21 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 10 insults)

[Interviewer: Ok, what about with your dad, are there any insults that go back and forth there?] No, no because I'm scared of him, if I insulted him, oh, he's a big guy. Yeah, no, no, we don't really insult each other…. (Stephanie: 21 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 10 insults)

Other participants reported less formal relationships with their parents, and more possibility for teasing. However, most participants did not joke with their family members using the same language as they did with their friends. Generally, with parents their language did not include any swearing, whereas with friends swearing was pervasive.

If they are in a good mood, yeah, I'll joke with them…. Sometimes I called Dad a geezer, or, you know, I call Mom. Or whenever Mom and Dad forget something I say, “You know, it's
Alzheimer’s, you guys are going to go.” I’ve always joked about putting them into a nursing home, so. (19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 15 insults)

I mean, we’re not like serious all the time either, but… I don’t like talk to them like that. I would say that my language around them is very different, it’s still playful because I’m a playful person, you know I like to entertain all the time and make people laugh but I know that I can’t use those words around my family. (20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, gay, Christian, listed 13 insults)

These reports were expected and consistent with a number of previous studies (e.g., Bailey & Timm, 1976; Simkins & Rinck, 1982; Winters & Duck, 2001) that have found that individuals reduced or stopped using swear words in the presence of people who would be offended by them, “such as elders, church members, parents, children, strangers, and members of the opposite sex” (Winters & Duck, 2001, p. 69).

Siblings. As with parents, participants reported a wide range of insult behaviors with siblings, with the primary determining factor being the level of formality in the relationship. The more formal end of the sibling range is remarkably similar to parents; there are no insults at all, or participants insulted using more mild language than they would use with friends.

No. I can’t even think of it. No…. It would be kind of uncomfortable. At least, it would be for me, I mean, my brother calls me stupid? I mean, I don’t know. (25 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 9 insults)

[I]t's more the most harmless, the dork, geek. I wouldn't call my brother gay or use those kind of words or any kind of swear words or racial words or anything like that. (Cole: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 32 insults)

My brothers we might kind of tease around, but not as like, intense as with my friends. Not so much of like, the dirty words or anything…. It's the age difference and I just never grew up with them like that. Because my brother is four years older than me. (18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Methodist, listed 8 insults)

On the other hand, the upper end of the sibling relationship range is significantly less formal than informal parenting relationships (thus allowing for more insults). Indeed, many participants described using teasing insults with their siblings in the same way as with their friends.

Yeah with my brother. Our relationship, we're close. I have treated him like he is the same age as me…. Yeah, we cut on each other. Like he doesn't brush his hair all the time, I still don't understand to this day, so I'll call him nappy head and stuff like that. Talk about his clothes and stuff like that. (Nathan: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 51 insults)

Me and my brother can go on and on. Like, insulting each other. At the supper table, my brother can say one thing to me, and I'll say something right back, and we'll just go back and forth at the dinner table. My family is really laid back, like they are really easy going. Like, we poke fun at each other all the time, and they can all team up on me and make fun of me at the dinner table, and it's just funny. (Lisa: 19 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)
Like, I tease my sister because she's like, about to be 36, and she dress like she's my age, and I'll be like, “You're such a slut.” Like, “You're a freak.” She be like, “You're a freak, too!” I tell her, “You need to dress like a mother” and all this other stuff. She'll be like, “No, I don't. No, I don't.”… As far as my brothers go, like, they really don't use anything really. Like, I really don't play with them as much. (Vanessa: 19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 22 insults)

Some participants used age or sex of their sibling to explain why their relationship was formal, but the determination of formal or informal is inconsistent on those variables from participant to participant. For example, the 18 year-old white woman described a four-year age difference from her brother as increasing the level of formality, whereas Vanessa described an informal teasing relationship with her sister who is 17 years her elder.

For angry situations, siblings seemed to be in a category all their own, in which insults were often openly expressed and uncensored – even by participants who reported that they do not use angry insults with friends or parents.

[I directly insult] My brother. I think he's really incompetent.... He's stupid. God, he's just dumb…. I mean, there's a term. The word nigga, not nigger, niggas, you know? We use that for, you know, somebody that is just low-life, pathetic, you're not doing anything with your life, your child's life, nothing…. I can't believe that my brother - I have a brother that is a nobody, that is like nothing. (Lanelle: 21 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 23 insults)

[Interviewer: Who are you angry at most often when you use these words?] Usually my brother. That's an easy answer. Can't live with him, can't live without him. (Jason: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 59 insults)

[Interviewer: Do you use any insults with your sister?] I call her a bitch all the time. And, I call her selfish and, let's see, lazy. That's about all. (21 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 17 insults)

For sibling relationships that are already informal, i.e., they include teasing insults as described above, there appears to be the additional element of low anticipated negative responses for angry insults. Because they are family, they cannot lose these relationships. In contrast, as shall be shown next, when participants were angry with friends they frequently did not express their anger for fear of permanently damaging the friendship.

Friends. Most participants described frequent teasing or joking use of insults with friends. When a friendship was close, teasing insults were more likely to be included and enjoyed.

[S]omeone you know, you've been around, you're familiar with, calling you an asshole, you'd just say, “Oh, you're an asshole too.” Throw it right back at them and you won't think nothing of it. So, I mean, I guess they kind of have to earn the right [laughing].... When you call someone an asshole you know they're your friend! (Brian: 19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)
Well, with our group of friends, it's pretty common to insult each other to the fullest. We're pretty hard on each other, you know, that's the way we know... we show that we're friends, you know? (Nick: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 14 insults)

Because they're my friends. They expect [joking insults] from me, I guess. Because they know my personality, so, I mean, they do the same thing to me. I mean, we have the type of relationship. (Tiffani: 19 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 20 insults)

I've known him a long time [11 years] and the other friend I met two years ago so I mean we've got a strong friendship.... So, I mean, we all know it's just playing when we do use the [insult] words so. I mean, words are words. (Marcus: 18 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 17 insults)

Clearly, friendship was often a precursor to teasing insults. But, teasing insults were also sometimes a precursor to friendships. Goffman (1959) described the feeling-out process.

When individuals are unfamiliar with each other's opinions and statuses, a feeling-out process occurs whereby one individual admits his views or statuses to another a little at a time. After dropping his guard just a little he waits for the other to show reason why it is safe for him to do this, and after this reassurance he can safely drop his guard a little bit more. (p. 192)

Several white men in the study described using a similar feeling-out process with teasing insults. They began with “some small, not so harmful jokes” (Mike) and tested for the person’s response. If the target responded in a way similar to their friendship group or they laughed, then they were perceived as “cool” and a fun acquaintance began.

If the potential target was not the same sex as the insulter, however, the feeling-out process was usually skipped and the target was generally seen as inappropriate. It appears that the mere presence of an opposite sex person in a group can increase the level of formality for some participants, even when the person is not the insult target.

I don't know, I guess you can use it but you have to know the girl real well on that…. I have to know the girl real well before I do it, kind of like a sister kind of deal. Like, I've known her for years. (Bobby: 24 year-old man, white, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 35 insults)

[Interviewer: So, you would never have a cap session with women?]…. I wouldn’t do it with a woman because all the girls I know are a little more sensitive and fall for what we might throw out there, and like, no matter what they say, we know not to fall for, and so, no, we can’t include you on something like that. And, usually, like I said, it’s just me and the guys always hanging out; there’s hardly girls there and the girls who are involved are our girlfriends, and of course, the reason we wouldn’t probably cap with the girls is because we wouldn’t want to insult another guy’s girl or something like that. And, there’d be a whole respect issue and then the real drama would start [laughing]! So, we try to stay away from that. (Martin: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 35 insults)

…I don't normally talk about my guy friends. I don't joke with them like that....I just don't think it's necessary. Because I feel closer to my girlfriends to say that kind of stuff, you know? (Brittany: 22 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 21 insults)
The girls make fun of the girls and the guys make fun of the guys. I'd say pretty much, yeah.

(Joanna: 20 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 20 insults)

Yes, and the difference is because like, I feel like you wouldn't call a male a bitch just for the simple fact, like, for instance, if he was to call you a bitch back, you would be so offended. So, I wouldn't do that to him. But, like, my friends, since we're just playing and we know that we're playing, I'll use it on them. (Vanessa: 19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 22 insults)

I find that in situations… that girls don't take it, they don't have such a good, as good of a sense of humor in the lines of [insults] as some guys. If they're both people I know on similar terms, they might take offense to it more often. (Josh: 21 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 10 insults)

These excerpts are in contrast to Armstrong's (1997) and Schwebel's (1997) findings of mixed-sex groups playing insult games, of which there was only one report in this study. These excerpts were consistent, however, with Eders’ (1991) conclusion that males and females use insults in different ways; males border on ridicule and females engage in more self-denigrating teases. She also asserted that males and females use different social cues to “signal the playful nature of the activity” (p. 196). Overall, participants reported very few close opposite sex friends. Perhaps the feeling-out process is skipped because it is presumed that women and men will not become good friends. The above excerpts also raise a number of other social cue elements, including anticipated responses to insults, and appropriate symmetrical insults, both of which will be discussed in later sections.

In contrast to participants’ reports of angry insults with their siblings, most participants did not use angry insults with friends. In part, this was related to self-concept and goals, as discussed earlier. An additional component with friends, however, was the anticipated (negative) consequences to the friendship.

You know, like of course you could say something, but at the end it didn’t prove anything. Maybe you might have lost respect from somebody, you know, so I would probably always say, “Damn, damn,” and just walk around. You know, I probably would write lyrics or poems or something like that, so I was always using it [anger] to inspire another part of me. (Tyler: 21 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 10 insults)

If I was angry with a friend like, I called my friends bitches sometimes I wouldn't say bitch if I was mad, because to me it's no longer joking… if we were in an upset situation or argument and one of them called me a bitch… to me it's not a joke if you're being rude to me and I wouldn't appreciate that - that would cause a whole new argument than probably what we talking about before…. Someone's feeling would be hurt and it would cause them to be more angry than they were to begin with. (20 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 53 insults)

You try to make your tone more serious and I think that's maybe a way of trying to tell, to let them know that you're getting upset without getting, making them mad. In other words, you kinda walk a fine line with your friends as far as when they upset you, how much can you really let your anger out before they're going to get mad at you for being mad at them and kind of, how do I want to say this, and you have to worry about them taking offense to it and possibly causing an end to your friendship. So I think maybe the reason that you use a lot of the same words and just try to give
them different overtones that let them know you're mad without really risking your friendship.
(Cole: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 32 insults)

Well, it depends how mad I am. If I'm really mad, yeah. If I'm so-so I am going to keep it inside.
But if I'm like really, really mad, yeah, sure. (Len: 20 year-old man, non-native English speaking,
white, Lithuanian, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 6 insults)

Authority figures. No participants reported an instance of joking with insults with an authority figure other
than their parents. Armstrong (1997) did report on an instance in which one of his students “busted” him by calling
him a “homo,” and it was so unusual that he conducted and published a study of what the intent behind this insult
(and other anti-gay terms) might be. In addition, only two participants described incidents in which they angrily used
insults towards an authority figure.

[In response to a lower grade than he felt he deserved:] I just got so frustrated and I just flung [the
papers] down on the desk and stormed out. Apparently, the corner of it almost chipped her
fingernail or something and so I had to defend myself on assault and battery charges. I believe,
and I am not sure now, but I believe I may have called her an asshole. (21 year-old man, white,
suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 41 insults)

It was at the end of our shift… and [my boss] just kept calling and calling, and I was like, “We're
trying to get this done so we can get out,” and so I kind of cussed him out over the phone…. I felt
kind of bad about it Afterwards. Like, wish I hadn't done it. [Interviewer: Can you tell me what
words you used on the phone with him?]…. I called him a bastard, and don't remember what I said
now, I said, used the F word a lot. F- you and, a few others I can't remember. (20 year-old woman,
African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 14 insults)

These incidents were exceptions in the sample, and as the first excerpt demonstrates, imprudent on the part of the
participants because they did not follow rules of deference to authority (Goffman, 1959). More frequently, angry
insults were used towards authority figures only indirectly, or out of the range of the target entirely.

[At his last football game in high school, he had been prevented from playing very much, and his
team lost.] I was just talking about the coaches, just going off like, “Them mother fucking
coaches.” I threw my helmet. I started to leave. I slouched my head, didn't shake nobody's hand…
I didn't talk to my coaches until like, it was like he forced me to come and see him…. I wouldn't
know what to say to him I was so angry at him. Then after a while I guess like maturity kicked in
or something and I was just like, there's nothing I can do about it. (18 year-old man, African-
American, suburban, heterosexual, Presbyterian, listed 11 insults)

[Interviewer: Okay. Why didn't you say [the insults] to your teacher instead of behind her back?]
Respect. Out of respect because she's my teacher and something. I might need her for some other
thing and she might remember that and be like, “Oh, do you remember that?”… [Interviewer:
You might need her or she's got power over you.] Yeah. She can also take that to the dean of the
college and I could get in trouble for that too. So. [Interviewer: Okay. So it's sort of looking out
for yourself?] Yeah, watching myself. Watching my back, yeah. (Marcus: 18 year-old man,
African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 17 insults)

As evidenced in the latter excerpt, the participant has a reasonable sense of the potential consequences of insulting a
person who has power over you. The participant quoted in the former excerpt said his insults within hearing range of
his coaches, but did so indirectly enough that the coaches did not need to confront him regarding the inappropriate nature of his self-described “temper tantrum.”

Strangers. Again, there were no reported instances of direct teasing insults towards strangers. Kowalski (2001) states:

Rarely if ever do people tease strangers. They may joke but not tease… Teasing is a means of conveying to others the camaraderie or intimacy that one shares with the target of the tease. It may also be used to enhance one's relationship with others, because almost everyone can enjoy the fun involved in good-natured teasing. (p. 189)

In contrast to the direct nature of teasing, however, participants frequently did insult strangers without their knowledge, generally as a form of play between friends. The most influential element of this pastime appears to be the low degree of accountability (to the stranger), so this phenomenon is explored further in the next section.

Direct angry or serious insults, on the other hand, appear to fall into a different category altogether.

Participants were divided on whether they were more or less likely to angrily insult a stranger than a friend. A number of participants described being less likely, or needing greater provocation, to insult a stranger.

[Interviewer: Can you think of any time that you have insulted somebody you don't know very well to their face?] I don't think I ever have. That'd be so rude. I don't even think I'd have the guts to even do it. (Stephanie: 21 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 10 insults)

[I]t's kind of like a decency thing for me, I won't scream obscenities at people. Unless they are screaming back at me, I guess, but I wouldn't initiate anything purposefully…. It has to be something that is either, if somebody is directly trying to upset, purposefully trying to upset me, or if I'm just in a really bad mood and somebody's doing something that I think is unreasonably annoying and I just can't take it anymore it would be a blurt out of aggression or something. (Gina: 24 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 11 insults)

I have to really be, I guess, more justified. I'd have to make sure I justified it first before I started cussing somebody out. I probably wouldn't use motherfucker or something like that. I'd probably use asshole or bitch or something like that…. I am sure you'd get your point across with those basically. (Bobby: 24 year-old man, white, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 35 insults)

Others described being more likely to insult a stranger, because you don’t have the history that makes you give them the benefit of the doubt when they upset you. In addition, a participant reported that she does not care if she hurts a stranger’s feelings, because the stranger is not important to her.

There is always like that thing, like female rivalry. I don't know why it is but girls just don't get along sometimes, especially if they don't know each other. I don't know what it's about but, I don't know… Like, if you can see it across the room. Somebody just staring you down or just giving you the wrong look, you just want to throw some words in their face. (18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Methodist, listed 8 insults)

Okay, hypothetically speaking, if I'm having an argument I would call them whatever came to my mind. It doesn't matter to me because you're not one of my best friends. I don't have to bite my
tongue for you, you are nobody to me, you do nothing for me. You don't affect my life in any way
so I don't care if I hurt your feelings. (Lanelle: 21 year-old woman, African-American, urban,
heterosexual, Baptist, listed 23 insults)

Indeed, rather than simply not caring if they hurt a stranger’s feelings, some participants described using insults with
strangers to deliberately provoke or intimidate them, depending on the participant’s goals in the moment. Both uses
of insults are consistent with Kowalski’s (2001) assertion that “an individual who wants to be perceived as tough
and someone to be reckoned with may engage in malicious teasing” (p. 189).

[Interviewer: Are there any words that you would use for anger outside your group of friends?]
Usually, that's when it'll get kind of threatening, like “Fuck you, I'll kill you” or “Fuck you, I'll
beat your ass” type of thing…. I mean you really like, are serious about it, you know?…. If some
guy comes up to you like, “Look, I'm gonna kill you,” I'm like, “Look buddy, you may want to
kill me, but look at me, look at my friends, look at how much bigger we are than you! I mean,
you may get a couple of good licks in on me, but I mean, think about what’s going to happen to
you! You don’t want to come talking trash to me!” (Mike: 22 year-old man, white, suburban,
heterosexual, Catholic, listed 29 insults)

…People get into, “Oh my God, this guy's a dick,” they'll say it right in front of his face, and you
know, they'll just start trying to cut them down. Or asshole is another one that comes up… if it
comes down to fights, they'll start calling them pussies, and fags, to try to make them feel smaller
so that if, maybe if they want a confrontation, they'll use those insults to try to make them… and it
usually will escalate into a fight, from my perspective. (Brian: 19 year-old man, white, rural,
heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)

…I think if you get into a fight you hear the same exact words, like most people say a lot of the
words on there [his insult list] can be used to start fights. But if you use them with your friends it's
just funny. (Alex: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 25 insults)

For several participants, the use of drugs and alcohol changes their willingness to insult strangers. These
participants had prohibitions against initiating insults with strangers, but in the context of an altered state those
prohibitions were ignored.

Well, when I used to use drugs and drink a lot, they'd come out a lot and I'd fight. I used to be a
mess. I used to date this guy and all of his ex-girlfriends were always trying to fight me. In fights
and stuff like verbal fights where you would intentionally say something to rip somebody down.
(Katie: 18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 63 insults)

I don't really use [insults] all too much. Maybe unless I'm drunk and I have no idea what I'm
talking about, and I'm like, “Oh, did you see that guy standing back there, or whatever, he looks
like Mr. Potato Head,” or something real dumb like that you say when you're drunk. And, the guy
might hear you and be offended, I don't really know. But, I don't really pay too much attention to
that when I am drunk. (Mike: 22 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 29
insults)

Some male participants were willing to insult strangers who were either doing a poor job providing a
service the participant was expecting, or were customers who were insulting or offensive to participants who provide
customer service. The first participant provides an example of both.
Poor service is, you know… I'm a good tipper and everything like that so I kind of reward good service so. If you can't do the job I kind of will make sure I tell you [by insulting you]. [Later he states:] My job. This guy came in that. He wanted to process something and he was supposed to hand it in to us. He didn't give it to me … and he said I took it from him so. He was back and forth arguing and he finally found it then… I was like, “Thanks a lot… dummy.” You know, “Thanks for apologizing.” (26 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 9 insults)

…[T]he air attendant got kind of smart-ass with me…. I was like, you know, you shouldn't be like that and she started opening up her mouth and I wanted to cuss her out but I cannot really do that here, so. I just tried to say little remarks that would make her apologize and shut her mouth and that's what she did, so. She looked at me and, I'm, not too loud, like, “Bitch.” (Otis: 22 year-old man, non-native English speaker, white, Greek, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 20 insults)

I'll insult [customers] back… I'll usually tell them that they're ignorant when they say something to me like that. Like “You're dumb, we're not racist” or something like that, but yeah, I always fight back with them... I call them dumb all the time. Like “You're dumb.”… [B]ut that's the only one I would really use, because I wouldn't want to push it too far at work, just because you can get sued if you say something stupid, so. So, I wouldn't push it too far there. (Alex: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 25 insults)

The only time I've really gotten in people’s faces is when I was at work and that's because they got nasty first so. (Alfred: 19 year-old man, biracial, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 15 insults)

[In response to a sales clerk’s refusal to sell him beer without proper identification:] I was like, “That's kind of rude” and he was like, “Well, that's the way it goes.”… I kind of took it as offensive. I was just walking away and was like, “You asshole.” … He said something like, “What did you say?” I said, “You're an asshole.” (Bobby: 24 year-old man, white, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 35 insults)

The connecting thread between the above excerpts seems to be that participants felt entitled to a particular type of treatment; violation of their expectations not only allows for retaliation, but also perhaps requires it.

The other situation in which participants insulted strangers was in their cars. The interaction with a stranger in this type of instance is frequently very brief or indirect, and seems to fit best in the Intent, Anticipated Responses, and Degree of Accountability section.

Other interactions. There are some situations in which the usual rules with a particular target may change. For instance, some participants talked about changing or censoring their language with friends when they were in public places, or churches, or around friends’ parents.

When we're like, together and we're like, by ourselves, everything's game. When we're out in public, it's kind of like, “Hey, watch it with the gay and lesbian and the black stuff because there's a lot more of them that are open about it in college.” So, it's like, when we go out in public, we don't really kid around about it too much. Or, if we do it's real kind of, “Dude, shh, not so loud. Somebody else might hear us and really get offended by that.” So, it's, I mean, we do have an awareness that other people may be offended by that, and we try not to bother other people… (Mike: 22 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 29 insults)
So, I think that when you're in that environment where everybody is the same as you... or there's enough people... that you figure that everybody is the same as you, you don't have these inhibitions as much as when get out there and you meet more people that are different races and backgrounds and sexual orientations. I guess, you kind of worry a little more about offending somebody. (Cole: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 32 insults)

*Intent, anticipated responses, and degree of accountability.* Anticipated or historical negative responses created an insult-prohibitive environment with some parents and siblings. In many other situations, the anticipated responses are positive. In this section, I explore the intersections of intent, anticipated responses, and degree of accountability.

Insults as a form of play. Informal, close friends were the most frequent targets of joking insults. In friendships, social cues to read (i.e., this is an informal environment, with appropriate targets and potential positive responses) become inextricably linked with the social cues to convey. Most frequently, the vital message to convey is the intent to be playful.

Baxter (1992) studied the role of play in intimate relationships, and found that play serves six functions, providing: 1) a demonstration of closeness, 2) a way to enhance closeness, 3) a way to “manage sensitive or conflictual issues without fear of jeopardizing the underlying relational stability” (p. 337), 4) a communication strategy that avoids embarrassment, 5) a way for individuals to be creative and “celebrate their individual qualities while simultaneously embedded in an interdependent relationship” (p. 337), and 6) “a richer repertoire by which to construct meaning” (p. 337). Baxter found that teasing (often in the form of insults) accounted for nearly one-fifth of the reported play instances in personal relationships. Participant reports in the present study supported the classification of teasing or insult use with friends as a form of play. In the previous *Friends* subsection, excerpts showed that closeness was a precursor to teasing insults and teasing insults were a way to enhance and test new relationships (the feeling-out process). In addition to those reports, some participants described ritualized games of this nature with their friends. Schwebel (1997) and Shapiro, Baumeister, and Kessler (1991) termed these games “verbal duels.”

Verbal dueling is the artful exchange of spoken teases and insults between two or more participants, usually performed in informal circumstances. Conversants, called duelers, work to outperform each other with witty comebacks and, ultimately, win the duel. Other members of the social group serve as an audience and judge quality; a good statement earns laughs, a poor one jeers. In many cases, audience response proclaims the winner. (Schwebel, 1997, p. 326)

In addition, to be taken as play, most teasing insults needed to be false to be funny.
Verbal dueling adheres to rules and expresses derogation in imaginative, obviously exaggerated statements. These farfetched insults cannot be taken literally, and the verbal dueling is viewed as a type of game. (Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991, p. 465).

Several participants agreed with this conceptualization of insult content. For example,

I tell everybody like, “They call me the black Barbie!” And I'm like, “Oh, whatever.” I just laugh it because I find it's funny. Like if somebody wants to come up there and say that to me who didn't even know me, didn't even know if I was educated or not then I would get offended. Like, “Why would you say that to me?” [Interviewer: So, it's okay from your friends… Because they know you're smart.] Yes, they can call me dumb because they really know, yeah. Jeez, now that sounds stupid! (Vanessa: 19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 22 insults)

Descriptions of verbal dueling are reminiscent of “playing the dozens,” described by Garner (1983), but are also different in several important ways. Playing the dozens has greater elements of aggression and can be played between strangers; it is expected that the insults will make one angry, but you must maintain your façade of “cool” (Garner, 1983). In verbal dueling, however, you are not only expected to not act mad, you are expected to not be mad. The insult games described by participants in the present study demonstrated little aggression, and served more as forms of bonding (i.e., demonstrating and enhancing closeness), expressing creativity, and constructing meaning. It appears that swearing in this context may also serve similar functions.

Swearing with someone else may be a simple indication of relaxation, or informality, and could even demonstrate a shared language and experience of target objects or people. Its function relationally could then be to indicate intimacy as much as to denote the meaning of a particular object. (Winters & Duck, 2001, p. 66)

Participants described verbal duels, sometimes called capping or riffing (Armstrong’s participants called it busting or ranking). African-American men had the most ritualized and deliberate processes, though a few other participants also described such games among their friends. The following excerpts also demonstrate the anticipated and achieved response of pleasure and increased social esteem associated with the fifth element of play, creativity and individuality. Indeed, Tyler terms people with exceptional dueling creativity as aristocratic cappers.

[M]e and [name] used to hang out with each other and we had nothing to do, so, you know, we started capping on each other or something like that. It was more like an art form. Around him you have to be good at what you say because he’ll look at you and the first thing he’ll be like, ‘shut the hell up.’ That’s the first thing he will say and then he would start going on you and he’ll like take words out of the air and like form words…. The words is not in the dictionary. Then he would end up with bitch. So, that would be the funniest thing and all everybody could do was just laugh at him. He was so funny…. [gives an example, which causes him to laugh so hard he can barely speak.] [Interviewer: What about with your other friends?] They just watched. Because… nobody ever had that creativity like [name]. He was like the caps king, so if you beat [name] he started to sweat you, so you knew you were good…. [Interviewer: So it was sort of reserved for the very skilled?] The very skilled. Yeah, aristocratic cappers. That’s great! (Tyler: 21 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 10 insults)
Oh, a cap session, yeah. Me and my friends usually do that all the time, sometimes when we’re bored and we even had it as a bonding experience. What we did was a large group of our friends… went over to another guy’s house… and it was just all guys, there was no females allowed…. And you know, we just talked about experiences with females and things we go through… and at the end of the whole thing we had a cap session, caps meaning we just insult each other back and forth over and over again…. I remember like last year… me, [name], and a lot of other black guys, we’d just do cap sessions all the time and it used to get pretty bad cause he’s very creative! [laughing]… I’m like “Oh my God, man, something is wrong with you to come up with something like that!” (Martin: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 35 insults)

It can be funny, I mean. I don't believe it's ever happened in a situation like this, where it is just like me and my friend, or just two people, there's always other people around, an audience. Usually it is for entertainment purposes. (Jason: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 59 insults)

[It] will be like, really, really, silly, crazy names, like, you know, cunt, bitch, stupid, fuck, you know. Like string them together, and they will use a whole barrage of obscenities… make the silliest things they can possibly, you know, like a six word insult. And, it will just kind of go back and forth, and we'll start, it degrades to like, crazy stuff, like toenail sniffer, and really, really silly stuff…. It's kind of like, who can make up the most creative insult! (Gina: 24 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 11 insults)

Though there were several other African-American and white men who described the same type of game, Gina was the only woman who described being part of a verbal duel. She was also the only woman to describe a primary friendship group that included both women and men.

Many participants described playing with insults frequently, but not necessarily in a game-like, verbal dueling way. This group includes participants from all of the sex-race groups.

Words like fag, or when we play basketball we call somebody sorry or weak. Just playing. Like I have a friend, he plays basketball all the time and like every time he comes into my room I tell him he can’t play basketball…. It is just something to say, I guess. (Nathan: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 51 insults)

Yeah, we kind of like, pick their flaw and go after it…. [W]e'll like hit into their, “All right dude, then fuck you man, why don't you shut the fuck up?” And then we're like okay, now we go for something else. “Let's see, how about them pants you're wearing, them's pretty ugly!” (Mike: 22 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 29 insults)

We make fun of each other a lot. If somebody's hair is a mess or something like when I wake up in the morning, my roommate, everyday, is like, “You look so ridiculous. Put some make-up on! Comb your hair!” Me and my roommate do a lot. But, the rest of my friends, like, I mean, we all joke about each other, like what we wear and what our hair looks like and stupid stuff. (Lisa: 19 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 29 insults)

Like, if it's something, like something flew out of your mouth, it's going to be something like, “You're a pig.” Or, you do something dorky, it'd be, “Oh, you're a dork,” or “Weirdo.”…. I mean, it's not like very insulting. I don't think it should be insulting. It depends on the way you say it…. We usually use stupid, you're a bitch, we can say something like that. (18 year-old woman, non-native English speaking, Russian, white, urban, heterosexual, Jewish, listed 6 insults)
[Y]ou know, we jokingly back and forth call each other tricks and bitches. Don't ask me why, but it's like, “What's up bitch?” You know, even though it's supposed to be “What's up girl?” You know the crowd. (19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 17 insults)

In the latter excerpt, the participant highlights the well-established phenomenon called “friendly insult greetings” (Powers & Glen, 1979), described by a large number of participants. Friendly insult greetings generally followed the same rules as for other insult play: you should be informal friends (though, for men, a potential friend or acquaintance will do), you should be the same sex, and you should use a feeling-out process before you employ any major taboo terms.

The final category of insults used for play is insulting people behind their backs. Sometimes this is done to release anger; those instances will be addressed in the next subsection. Quite frequently, however, participants reported talking about others (albeit in a mean way) as a form of entertainment in their social group.

Yeah, well we're like people watchers. We like to watch people and be like, “What are they doing? Why are [they] even wearing that?” I guess to an extent we do insult them, but it's like, nothing personal to them, and we would never like say anything to them. Like, so they would hear us. (Stephanie: 21 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 10 insults)

Maybe if I see somebody that just strikes me as funny, you know, I won't say it to them. I'll just, you know, I'll just nudge my friend and make a joke or something like that… [Interviewer: So, you might be more inclined to insult somebody if you know that they can't hear you?] Yeah. … I don't really mean to insult them, personally, and I wouldn't want to get in a fight over it either. (Josh: 21 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 10 insults)

All we do is make fun of people. Like we make fun of each other but at the same time like if I'm walking and like I see somebody that, “No, she didn't just walk out of the house like that,” we go off on them. We don't like do it to like where they can hear us. We don't do it to hurt people's feelings but we do say like stuff that makes us laugh, you know. Bring up what they're wearing or if they too big or something. Just to be doing it. Like we don't go to their face and tell them….. You just don't want to be going out in public just standing there so we just started making fun of people. I mean, people set themselves up. You come out looking like that and I'll tear them up. I will light you up but like I said, you will never hear it.” (Alfred: 19 year-old man, biracial, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 15 insults)

Like, “Girl.” It's just eating away at you. I'll go home and tell my boyfriend six or seven hours later, like, “I seen this girl in class today,” you know. And, it's just because you can't hold it in. (Lanelle: 21 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 23 insults)

[Participant describes being in a group of women acquaintances whom are together only because their boyfriends are friends.] We go to car shows all the time, like, that's what the guys do, and we are like, tag-a-longs. So, when the guys are at car shows, working on their cars, or cleaning their cars, or looking at cars [laughing], we'll sit, and like, talk about the people that walk by. Because, that's the only thing for us to do…. Like, “Oh, she's dressed like a slut,” or you know, “She's too fat, she shouldn't be wearing that.” Stuff like that. (20 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 16 insults)
The final excerpt shows that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between entertainment and relieving discomfort. The participant and her acquaintances need an entertaining way to pass time because they are not interested in cars or each other. Insulting strangers engages them so they do not have to sit with each other in silence. In addition, this phenomenon was significantly more common in women than in men (the two men quoted were the only two who reported this phenomenon). Eder (1991) found that

…males are more comfortable with teasing that escalates into ridicule than are some females…
Many females, on the other hand, are concerned with the negative feelings of the targeted person and increasingly avoid open ridicule… (p. 196)

Thus, it may be that women more often felt uncomfortable teasing each other to bond, and instead turned to targets whose feelings would not be hurt because they were unaware of the tease.

Release of anger or discomfort. deKlerk (1991) describes many purposes of expletives in Western culture. Though there is no inclusion of the playful functions of insults, the points are well-matched to the angry uses of insults described by participants.

[Expletives] serve an overwhelmingly emotive or expressive function, being used most often to get rid of nervous energy when under stress, especially when one is angry or frustrated or surprised…. Expletives carry a powerful emotional and psychological charge, contravening social taboos and frequently used for shocking people, or indicating contempt or disregard for them…. Expletives have also been credited with acting as a social marker of group identity and solidarity, frequently serving to distinguish men from women in certain cultures, or marking membership of adolescent subcultures. (p. 157).

In the present study, participants’ reports of angry insults support deKlerk’s assertions. Even when angry insults do not accomplish any positive relational function (indeed, several participants reported relational damage), the participant felt she or he benefited from not keeping the anger “bottled up inside.”

Because you're mad and you like want to get it out of your system, too. Just like a relief.
[Interviewer: What words do you use with your girlfriend when you’re mad at her?] I think bitch is a nice word or slut. I like slut too. (Otis: 22 year-old man, non-native English speaking, white, Greek, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 20 insults)

But I'll insult my boyfriend… and I’ll mean it. And I'll insult my husband and I'll mean it…
[T]hey might think I'm joking, but it's not. Like I might repeat myself over a period of time, they think I'm joking with them, but I'm very serious. Very serious…. I try to go for the worst word I can think of at the moment. (23 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 10 insults)

The latter participant’s release of anger makes her feel better, though she seems to allow both men to believe she is joking, thus reducing the relational damage. As further support of the benefits of releasing anger through insults, one participant talked about how choosing to not insult when angry is not working very well for her.
Well, holding back insults can cause a build up inside. I don't know... if it is better in society to hold back an insult and to stop a confrontation or deal with that confrontation and feel a little better. Cause I don't know, all I know is I have some pent up anger. And it could be related to holding back insults and holding back. So holding back could make you probably more violent than those who don't. (19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 25 insults)

For participants who do release their anger through insults, the release of anger may be reflexive or unintentional. The following excerpts convey participants’ failed attempts to express their anger in a controlled manner.

[When she discovered her boyfriend kissing another girl:] At first I just kinda stood there… [Then I] said “Who's your little friend?” and he was like looking, looking stupid… I said “Don't look stupid now!”... [L]ike the girl, she laughed… she was like “Who's this little girl?”... And I'm like, “You don't think you should say anything to me because I don't, I don't know you, I don't want to deal with you, and it might be ugly if you start comments.”... So he's like, “This is not what it looks like.” And I'm like, “What the fuck do you mean, it's not what it looks like? You're kissing her, you're kissing her, what else could it look like, what else could it be?” And I was just like, “You're an asshole, you're an asshole, and you're cheating on me.”... I got so, like I actually started crying. And the girl she actually thought it was funny. And he's like “It's not, it's not was it looks like, I swear. I have a reason for this.” And I'm just like “F you!” I...I smacked him. (20 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 53 insults)

If I get angry with someone my pattern is to say more hurtful things. I try to hold my temper. I really don't like to say things. I normally think them in my head more than say them. It doesn't do any good to hurt somebody's feelings. If I make like a racial comment or you know.... I can say things, like, if I know something about a person I can say this and really hurt their feelings, you know? But I don't. I really try not to. [Interviewer: In the ideal world you never say it?] Well, yeah. I try to avoid as much conflict as possible. (Katie: 18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 63 insults)

On one end you're trying to be constructive in your insult in that, “That was dumb, why did you do that?” and I guess in the back of your mind, you're thinking you’re trying to help them be not as dumb... But then there are just kind of ones that you throw out there just to hurt the person, bitch, things like that nature where... there's nothing that they could do to cause you to say that, other than they've gotten you mad and now you're trying to bring them down. (Cole: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 32 insults)

One participant describes how a previously angry and hurtful incident with a friend has become incorporated into the teasing insults in that relationship. They released and expressed their anger in an incident that they retrospectively find silly.

Me and [name] always go, “Slut, you’re a slut.” Because one time we got in a fight, it was like the only fight we've ever had, and she made me mad, and I called her a slut and I hit her with my sandals. We were on the beach like running up and down the beach yelling at each other like, “You stupid slut.” She's like, “Bitch” and just all that stuff. So that's one word that we always tease each other, because we always refer back to that moment when we are running up and down the beach yelling at each other. So, I always call her that.” (Becky: 22 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 13 insults)

Goffman (1959) describes a related phenomenon.
Anecdotes from the past - real, embroidered, or fictitious - are told and retold, detailing disruptions which occurred, almost occurred, or occurred and were admirably resolved. There seems to be no grouping which does not have a ready supply of these games, reveries, and cautionary tales, to be used as a source of humor, a catharsis of anxieties, and a sanction for inducing individuals to be modest in their claims and reasonable in their projected expectations. (p. 14)

In these ways, people may use teasing to transform their history of angry insults together.

With friends, most participants refrained (or hesitated) from directly releasing their anger because of the anticipated responses (such as damage to the relationship) and the high degree of accountability. These instances were excerpted and discussed in the Friends subsection, and will not be repeated here.

All of the excerpts in this section involved the direct expression of anger towards the person who triggered the anger. Participants also reported on two categories of angry insults that had lower levels of both accountability and anticipated negative responses: road rage and talking behind people’s backs.

Road rage. A large number of white participants (9 women and 7 men) described yelling insults at drivers that (usually) cannot hear them. In contrast, three African-American women, three non-native English speaking men (two of whom were white), and one African-American man reported using these types of insults. Many participants described why they do it, articulating the intersections of low accountability, low opportunity for negative responses, and participants’ intents (usually to release anger).

I like motherfucker for people who are driving because they piss me off so much…. I just relieve all of my stress and tension, using bad words in my own car and my music going real loud so nobody can hear them, too. (Otis: 22 year-old man, non-native English speaking, white, Greek, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 20 insults)

[T]he more offensive the word the more attention getting it is and you only get like 30 seconds before they're driving away… [I]t's like road rage, I'll admit it…. If I like scream out the window at someone for like, not paying attention, I feel like they're going to be less likely to like, oh, I don’t know, like day-dream or put their make-up on in the car while driving… They’re less likely to do that if enough people like yelled at them…. So, it’s also a communication thing… It’s kinda like a critique of their driving skills but in a much more nasty manner… It’s more impacting. (Laura: 26 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 19 insults)

You know, you get cut off in traffic or something… When a conflict that arises that isn't worth pursuing but you vent a little bit of steam at them. You know? (21 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 41 insults)

In several cases, participants reported being very passive in their relationships, and that they did not express their anger towards others (some even denied ever getting angry). However, in the low accountability, low negative response situation of driving, they expressed their anger clearly and easily.

No, because I'm kind of the type of person that… I don't, like, insult, and I guess I get more upset and just kind of draw back from that. I'm more of the type of person like I mostly just cry and I'm so taken over by the hurt that I just kind of shut down… [When she gets mad in the car,
however: I’d say that’s more of an idiot thing, like, “Oh, you idiot!” Or like, “Where do you need to go this quick,” something like that, you know? (Joanna: 20 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 20 insults)

Kind of like I'm so mad at you I'm not even going to, you know, try to call you a name. I don't know. It's kind of hard to explain. [Interviewer: The madder you get the quieter it gets?] Yes.

[Later when asked about driving:] I have somewhat of a case of road rage. I tend to shout out words at people when I know that they can't hear me… Asshole, dick, stupid fuck, stuff like that. (Gina: 24 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 11 insults)

It is noteworthy that the intersection of accountability and low opportunity for negative response allowed several white participants to express their racism and sexism. A few of these participants were embarrassed by their statements, others were not.

Probably my favorite word on the road is woman - excuse me. I yell at all the drivers, they are all women to me. It's just, “Get in your lane, woman! There you go!” (Finn: 19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 15 insults)

That's when I'll start saying racial things… Nigger, chink, just anything, that, I don't yell it to them. I'll say it in my car. People pull out in front of me and I'll be like, “Ignorant nigger,” you know? I hate, I really don't like. I don't say them with other people around. It's kind of like my secret. You know, I don't like people to know a lot of that… Like with my best friend and my boyfriend I'll say it. Around people I don't know, no. (Katie: 18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 63 insults)

Yesterday the two people that cut me off were both black people and I remember thinking that to myself that, “Why do they have to be such bad drivers?” And then I kinda made myself think, “Well, you know, I was making a generalization there.” (Cole: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 32 insults)

…[T]here is always somebody doing something, cutting me off or not letting me over, something, casual road rage instigators. I swear, most of the time, I don't know if it's me, but most of the time it's an Oriental woman and that's how the whole “chink-bastard” thing got started. Just one of those things, I'll be in a hurry and somebody will pull out and it's just automatic, there it goes, won't even think about it just yell it. Don't care who's in the car I just yell it! (Jason: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 59 insults)

The above excerpts lend further support to deKlerk’s assertions regarding expressive function, indicating contempt, and acting as a social marker. Though the majority of participants making these statements were men, there was one woman. Indeed, the primary connection between these participants was their whiteness.

Talking behind people’s backs. Goffman (1959) described the relational and self-esteem benefits of talking behind people’s backs.

…[S]ecret derogation seems to be much more common than secret praise, perhaps because [doing so demonstrates] mutual regard at the expense of those absent and compensating, perhaps, for the loss of self-respect that may occur when the audience must be accorded accommodative face-to-face treatment. (Goffman, 1959, p. 170-171)
Bergmann (1993) also found relational benefits to gossiping, such that people who gossiped with each other expressed a greater sense of intimacy and cohesion based, in some part, on their shared willingness to break the social taboo against talking behind people’s backs. Indeed, participants in the present study described talking behind people’s backs as a particularly important coping mechanism for dealing with people in power, such as professors or customers.

That's when I use it most is I take an order and… they’re one of those horrible, mean rude people, you know, that treat you like crap. And I'll go where they can't hear me and I'll say, “That stupid bitch” or “That dumb ass” or something like that. (Lynn: 23 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 67 insults)

[He gives an example of a professor denying his request, and then the insults he used about her when he was talking to his friends:] I called her a couple. I called her like fat and all this.
[Interviewer: You don't have to censor the words.] A racist, a bitch, and stuff like that. Ignorant. I mean, I was going off because I mean, that's real stupid for you to tell me I can't make up a test because I have to be in the hospital…. I called her a whole bunch of, I called her a bitch, fat, slut, everything, ignorant, dumb, and stupid. (Marcus: 18 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 17 insults)

Releasing their anger with someone they trusted helped participants to maintain the rules of formality, eliminated negative responses, and had a low degree of accountability. In addition, it provided them with opportunities to further bond with friends to whom they were “venting.”

For others, talking behind someone’s back was the only option they had within their self-concepts as non-confrontational and passive people. None felt that talking behind someone’s back was positive, but all felt compelled to do it to release their anger. In these discussions, participants were in a bind – first stating that they try not to talk behind people’s backs, but then being asked to give an example. All gave me tremendous detail about other people and how awful they were.

[M]y reason for [talking behind someone’s back], that is to attempt to vent out all my frustration. But, what it ends up actually doing, and I’m fully aware of this, is that it spins me up more, and it gets me angry about it again. So, it's very counterproductive…. [I]t's like, I have to let it out somehow, and breaking furniture won’t do it, because then I’d end up with a whole room of broken furniture. (Laura: 26 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 19 insults)

That's [talking behind someone’s back] probably my way of venting…. I've got this friend, for example, … I just rant about him [to my girlfriend] all the time because it's like the guy won't leave me alone and I keep telling him that I don't have enough time…. I call him pothead, a crack head, son of a bitch, you know, wasting my time. (Gerald: 23 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 20 insults)

Like behind their back? I wish I didn't but yeah I do. I do, and if I'm going to be honest, yeah I do. [Interviewer: Can you think of what words or ways of insulting you use most often?] Bitch. You know, a mooch, like they just mooch or bum off people. Just sad, pathetic, things like that. [Gives example of last time she was mad. Continues her story:] Like, in AA there's like you have a whole
like array of personalities. There's a girl who comes in and out of the program and I keep my mouth shut about that. You know, goes out and drinks, comes back and she seems to not have anything better to do than to talk about other people.” (Katie: 18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 63 insults)

Katie was in a particularly difficult bind, because the offense that had made her so angry was that her target had spoken about her behind her back. It seems likely that the interview provided another opportunity to release anger, and participants needed to provide me with sufficient detail to demonstrate that their negative, socially and personally condemned behavior was justified by the outrageous behavior of others.

Intimidation/distraction. The final category of insults that combine intent, anticipated responses, and degree of accountability are sports-related insults. These insults functioned to get a negative response and to establish a hierarchy (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997). When used directly against opponents (high accountability), the intent was to try to damage the opponent’s game.

Sometimes like, if you play basketball… you'd just be like, “Shorty” or “You can't stop me.” You just say stuff, yeah… get each other angry. Trash talking, yeah. (18 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 15 insults)

I used them because I was a basketball player. I'd tell people they couldn't guard me or… they weren't good or like, anything I could think of. Just to distract her game or something I would say it. (18 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 27 insults)

Sometimes teammates insult the other team behind their backs (low accountability, positive response from teammates) to release their anger at mistreatment or unfair decisions.

I think when you get a team out there you know, “These guys are bunch of jerks, they're always pushing us around,” you know, things like that. Even about referee's, you know, “This guy's an idiot, he doesn't know what he's doing,” things like that. (Cole: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 32 insults)

Finally, several football players described insults directed at their own teammates. The best description of the purpose of those insults follows.

It's like everything is acceptable. Everything. Anything vulgar on the football field is acceptable because you want to be as rough as possible. You know, be as masculine as possible… It depends on the person, if they get offended or not because most of the time you know, when you step on the field it's just going to happen. So if you get offended then, that's like a sign of weakness. It's like, that's how we see we're getting into your head. The more we get into your head the more you get out of your game. That's how we win. (18 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Presbyterian, listed 11 insults)

Conveying intent. The way an insult is presented may be the key to the way it is received. Body language and tone are clear markers of intent, but also interact with the specific word choices. An appropriate word choice in
the wrong tone is likely to be received poorly; a wrong word in the right tone may result in someone giving you the benefit of the doubt.

I would say that the number one thing that composes a true insult, in order to throw one directly at a person when you're mad at them and you want to throw one at them, is body language, facial expression, and tone. I mean, people will take more offense to that than they will to words. I mean, if you just walk up to someone, don't even say anything, just stare at them right in the face, get a mad look and you stare them right in the face, and clench up real bad, they'll start to feel insulted, just without even saying any words... The words are just kind of, clarify the body language that you're throwing at them. (Brian: 19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)

It's not the words that are important it's the tone...Like if I say like, “Oh, fuck you” [or] like, “Fuck you” like if I'm really mad? That just makes a big difference. It's the same word but. (Hiro: 18 year-old man, non-native English speaker, Japanese, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 21 insults)

No participants described incidents of positive intent framing an offensive word. However, during the writing of this chapter, I witnessed an example of such an instance. A white therapy client called an African-American therapist (my colleague) niggah –the tone and body language were familiar, friendly, and conveyed positive intent. This colleague would normally have been very offended by use of this term and would have directly discussed his objections to its use with the client. However, the combination of that word with positive body language was so disconcerting that my colleague doubted that he had heard correctly, and did not respond. Later, a witness confirmed that he had heard correctly, much to his surprise.

Appropriate language. Participants who judged their social situations (i.e., target, level of formality, degree of accountability) to be appropriate for an insult faced three major tasks: identifying what words would be appropriate in the situation, picking a word to use from those options (one most likely to elicit the desired response), and conveying their choice with matching body language and tone (i.e., conveying their intent). Based on participants’ reports, there appear to be two vital components to identifying what words would be appropriate to a situation: 1) knowing what words or topics are unacceptable to the target and/or audience, and 2) identifying a word with appropriate opportunity for symmetry.

Unacceptable words and topics. A number of participants described very specific words and topics that they considered out of bounds. However, these boundary lines are far from universal, with participants describing their own particular trigger words and topics that may or may not be known to others. This is an area in which the intersection of insulter characteristics and appropriate language is especially clear.

The only time I really ever like, where I've said something [insulting] back to someone, it's usually just if someone talks about my height. You know, I'm not the biggest person, so when people
really ask me, or ask how old I am, I really get pissed off, too. I usually have something to say back to them. That's my real thing, that offends me, you know, I've heard of it since kindergarten. 
(Nick: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 14 insults)

The only thing we would say that would be out of bounds is talking about somebody’s Mom, and, that’s just like, that’s the woman who gave you birth. If you love her, you’d defend her until the day you die, and usually you don’t talk about somebody’s mother because that’s a good way to get your head beat, no matter what race you are. (Martin: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 35 insults)

If someone I didn't know called me a bitch I would probably look at them like we're about to fight, you know? … To me, if I was arguing with somebody outside, that would probably be the last thing that I would think to call them if I really wanted to hurt them, because I know how powerful the word or the insult is, you know what I mean? (Lanelle: 21 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 23 insults)

Like, we don't like using one of them, like “That's stupid.” That's about the only one I think we don't use often. [Interviwer: Why stupid?] I don't know, you just guess that everybody will get mad when you call them stupid. (19 year-old man, non-native English speaking, African, urban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 11 insults)

They're all bad but I mean, I think motherfucker is probably the worst because you are actually disrespecting mothers everywhere and that's not. I mean, in all of them you're disrespecting people. Retard is probably one of the worst too.…. (18 year-old woman, Latina from Puerto Rico, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 8 insults)

… I've got a really, like, thick temper and it doesn't like, really bother me that much…. But, you know, the whole family thing really bothers me... And, those are going to be the ones where some guy just comes up to me out of the blue and was like “Hey, yeah man, I know your cousin, and that kid's a fucking fag.” That would be the guy that I would be, without even saying anything, that I would just go ahead and swing at him…. [E]ven when I hang out with my friends, and we kid around, they know not to talk about, like, my family, because I just don't appreciate that, I won't do that to their family, they shouldn't do that to mine.” (Mike: 22 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 29 insults)

Mike’s excerpt illustrates two important themes. First, one might use an insult with a stranger that is generally perceived to be fairly low risk, and if it is the target’s trigger word, the response might be a physical assault. Second, friends are not only more likely to have a shared understanding and common language, but they are more likely to know your specific unacceptable words and topics. According to Planalp and Garvin-Doxas (1994):

Friends are, in essence, experts on one another and they seem to reap many of the advantages that experts show in other domains… they are more efficient in their talk. They know what words their partners will understand so they do not have to give elaborate descriptions. (p. 19).

An excellent example of friends’ expertise on one another arose when I had the opportunity to separately interview participants who knew each other. They separately reported the unacceptable insult topic for the second participant, though both reported that this topic had never been specifically discussed between them.

[A] friend… has a son who's six.... and he's mentally retarded, like handicapped really bad… I would never say… that she does not take care of her child the way that he needs to be taken care of. (Lanelle: 21 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 23 insults)
I am the only one who has kids [in our group of friends], and they would never come up to me and say, “You ain't a good mom.” They would never say nothing like that, because, of course, I am, and that is nothing to joke about… If they would say something like that, yeah, that's crossing and that is stepping over the line. But, they would never say nothing like that. (22 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 13 insults)

For these participants to both raise this topic, there are likely some underlying issues – such as the latter participant suspecting that Lanelle and her friends really do have criticisms of her parenting skills. However, the benefit of being an expert friend is that it is clear on all sides that no discussion of the topic will be possible, productive, or acceptable.

Participants also described some more general rules regarding ways that a teasing game could quickly become unacceptable. These rules were all identified by multiple participants.

[I]t all depends on your tone. If you can tell that the person is upset then it becomes out of bounds. (Nathan: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 51 insults)

Another rule is, if it’s something just really personal, that you just shouldn’t talk about. (Martin: 20 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 35 insults)

I mean there's some stuff I don't, like some personal stuff, like beliefs and like being gay and like really important stuff that I don't think we should joke about like appearances and I don't know. (Otis: 22 year-old man, non-native English speaking, white, Greek, suburban, Christian, listed 20 insults)

Your race is like who you are and your sexuality is who you are also so I wouldn't use those. If you're a homosexual than you are a homosexual. That's who you are so I don't, you know, that's just low to me. (Tiffani: 19 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 20 insults)

Margaret Cho, a comedian, articulated a similar personal issue boundary in her 2003 show, Revolution.

I'm sad most of all because somewhere somebody just got called a faggot or a dyke or a bulldyke or a butch or a chink or a nigger or a kike or a spic or a wetback or a bitch or a whore or a cunt. And unless to you that's a term of endearment, because for me in the right context it is, that person has been attacked solely because of who they are and that's not right. (Cho, 2003)

Finally, there was a group of participants who concurred with the above rules, and considered particular words offensive and unacceptable. However, they reported that sometimes their mood or their social situation created a context in which they used those words anyway.

Yeah sometimes I'll be like, "That movie is so gay." It's not talking about sexual orientation or whatever but it's kind of like, it gives your view on gay people or you think gay people are stupid so this movie…. I guess it's just socially acceptable. I don't know what the hell it is. I'll be honest with you. I can sit here and say I don't have a problem with gay people but then at times I'm like, "That is so gay." (Katie: 18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 63 insults)
You can't do something to be a bitch, you know what I'm saying? You can be ignorant and you can be mean but you can't be a bitch, and you just don't say that to somebody. You don't say that to a girl. You don't call a girl a bitch. [Much later in the interview he describes an incident in which his sister hurt his finger:] I was like, “I'm going to beat that bitch's ass if she come around me. I swear to God.” I don't use bitch that much but I was mad so…. When you're mad things just come out of your mouth. (Alfred: 19 year-old man, biracial, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 15 insults)

Symmetrical insults. Goffman (1959) articulated the rule of symmetry: “A symmetrical rule is one which leads an individual to have obligations or expectations regarding others that these others have in regard to him” (p. 248). In terms of insults, symmetry means that a participant should use only the type of word and degree of severity that she can reasonably accept and expect will be directed towards her in return. Thus, you follow the cues of your environment in determining not only if you should insult, but also what level of insult would be appropriate.

I guess it's by degree of who it is, how much the other person tolerates. I guess there's like the, oh, this insult is not going to piss him off too much. And do you understand kind of like, the ranking? Like these are the okay ones, and these are like the taboo ones, and these are the ones that you can't say. I guess that's the way I organize my insults. See how much damage would come after saying it or something like that. (Otis: 22 year-old man, non-native English speaking, Greek, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 20 insults)

Yeah, I would, I mean, usually when you give an insult to someone in a friendly context, you expect to get something back. Now, if I would call [a gay friend] a fag, what's he going to call me? Oh, you straight person, or… Now, that would be me bringing out a difference between us, and I couldn't really expect anything back, of that same, you know what I mean, he couldn't just bring something right back to me….[T]hen it's not funny. Or then it's an insult. (Brian: 19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)

I could say, you know, that somebody’s black as hell or picking cotton, but at the same time that’s my background, so at the same time I’m talking about myself, so it’s not really an insult because you’re insulting yourself, so you can relate…. No matter what kind of insults you throw at each other, the way you’re looked at by society…. I mean, you may look different, but you’re the exact same person, you’re just a black male. That’s why the insults are not really insults. (Martin: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 35 insults)

No white women described the need to be symmetrical in their insults of each other. However, the rule of symmetry may be a defining component of the opposite sex insult dynamic. When men talked about women having little sense of humor for insults (Friends subsection), or being more sensitive to insults, that begs the question of symmetrical insults. For example, one participant lamented the lack of insults available to her in insulting her male friends.

...[T]he other day we were all over at my house and there was a whole bunch of guys and a whole bunch of girls and the guys were just kidding around with us and were like, “Whatever you bitch, you slut.” Just like, kidding around with us. And we went outside and were talking about it and I was like you know, it's kinda strange how guys can throw these insults out about women and it's like you know, they can call us a bitch and slut and offend us and stuff like and what are we supposed to call them? Like asshole or players, but they like to be called players and assholes. That just like, rolls of their back that doesn't really offend them that much, you know? It's like the
only time you can really offend them is when you're like speaking specifically about them like something that's really true, because there's like no word that you can really throw out at a man that's going to insult him really, unless you get personal and when you're joking around you really shouldn't get personal like that you know? (Diane: 22 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 21 insults)

In addition to lamenting the impossibility of symmetry, this participant reinforces the importance of using insults that are known to be false.

So far, this section has included excerpts that articulate the rule of symmetry as applying to teasing insults. However, symmetry also appeared to apply when participants were angry. First, if you insult someone, you have broken the rules of decorum and you should reasonably expect to be insulted back. (Unfortunately, you may not know you have broken the rules of decorum, so a return insult may take you by surprise – such as in the Unacceptable words subsection where Nick identified questions about his age as inappropriate.) Second, some participants talked about using only generally acceptable words even when angry. Third, sometimes a symmetrical insult takes the form of creating a similar feeling in the target.

If you're being nasty I'm going to be nasty back. I'm going to hurt your feelings when you hurt mine so. I'm going to light you up so. That's just how I feel.” (Alfred: 19 year-old man, biracial, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 15 insults)

I would never, yeah, because still even though I might go off on you, I still kind of like unconsciously would say, “What could I possibly accept?” You know what I mean? Like if somebody called me a bitch if they're upset, I could accept that because I probably did the same, but I could never accept somebody calling me a nigger if they're upset, so I wouldn't do that to them. (Tiffani: 19 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 20 insults)

Me and my boyfriend just got in a really big fight and I told him I hated him about eighty times. I told him that I thought he was fat. He's not fat. I told him I thought he was stupid. I went down a list of insults and then I had to apologize and make myself look stupid like, you know, “I didn't mean it.” He's like, “You hurt my feelings, you made me mad.” I'm like, “I know, that's what I was trying to do.” (Lisa: 19 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)

The symmetry rule sometimes means restraint – there is a worse insult you could use, but it would cross your own boundaries to be called that, so you do not use it towards someone else. On the other hand, you might be willing to say many things you do not mean at all, just to create the same subjective level of pain in the other person as you are experiencing yourself.

Finally, one participant described how a violation of the potential for symmetrical insults makes the use of insults unacceptable.

[M]y coaches, they kind of, they were white, all my coaches were white back in high school. Now, they say stuff and I kind of take it to offense because, you know what I'm saying, they were
playing with it, but I'm taking it serious because, I mean, we're not really close in age. We're not, we're nowhere alike and I mean, they're funny but …. It's kind of weird. (Dante: 18 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 12 insults)

Clearly, this participant was not in a position to address the inappropriate nature of the insults, but he experienced the discomfort of violations of appropriate target, level of formality, and inappropriate language.

Generally, reading and conveying social cues in familiar environments are nearly automatic processes, becoming salient only when a cue is misread or poorly conveyed. This appears to largely hold true for insult use as well. However, at the edges of acceptability, it was clear that participants had put some specific thought into refraining from use of some words, or carefully controlling their words in some environments.

**Target and Audience Response**

The participants responded to insults in three ways: 1) positive: responses conveying pleasure and fun in the interaction, 2) negative: responses conveying anger, hurt feelings, or a direct statement regarding the social violation, and 3) neutral: the target hides a real response or reports having no response at all.

*Positive responses.* Eder (1991) states:

In fact, there is growing awareness that the ability to respond appropriately to playful attacks may be one of the more difficult interactional skills to develop. Although it clearly takes skill and cultural knowledge to initiate a teasing attack, it often takes more to resist one…. This is due in part to a greater awareness that it is the response to an attack that ultimately determines its meaning. (p. 183)

Thus, responding in a positive, playful way may determine the difference between serious ridicule and play. Participants in the present study who engaged in verbal duels and teasing with insults identified many possible positive responses to being an insult target. By far, the most popular response was to insult back, which indicated that the target wanted to be part of the game.

Yeah, when I get drunk. It kinda breaks it in; it just like makes it more comfortable when you start making fun of them a little bit. And then they start making fun of you and its like, "Oh, you're cool!" I don't know. (Alex: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 25 insults)

Oh yeah, we go back and forth, that's a must… you don't really want them to dog you or diss you or whatever, so you have to come back good like, "Oh, whatever trick" or you know. But it's always a laughing matter. (19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 17 insults)

For these responses to most effectively serve as entertainment, the response must be within bounds, symmetrical, and – ideally – creative, as described in the *Insults as play* subsection. Some participants reported that positive
responses also manifested as laughing – if there was laughter, they knew all was well and the tease was getting the intended response.

...[U]sually you can make the other one laugh, and if you could make them laugh then it's a good thing. So, if you have something witty to say and add some of those words in there, then it's a lot more fun... But it happens more when I'm drunk... When I'm drunk I'm like "Oh, you're a faggot and blah, blah." And we start laughing and it's a good time so...I don't know. (Alex: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 25 insults)

We usually save the insults for each other, you know what I mean? I mean, it's hard for us to really bring out a good insult on someone you don't know, than when we just say it to our friends, you know? I mean, they get the biggest laugh out of it. (Nick: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 14 insults)

These responses are consistent with Schwebel’s (1997) study in which verbal duel participants described distinct pleasure in their duels, both because of the entertainment value and the presence of friendly competition.

Alongside the above positive responses, a group of “positive” responses appeared to be unusual. Although it was clear in these participants’ descriptions and demeanors that teasing and insult games were enjoyable, their words conveyed a lack of negative experience rather than a positive one.

I think you insults your friends a lot more I think when you have a longer history with them, and you can go way back, and you understand each other, and you don't really have to worry about it really offending each other as much as you would with say people that you don't know as well. (Cole: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 32 insults)

I mean, just calling each other motherfuckers, and assholes, and dickheads and stuff like that… Just joking around…. I don't think anybody took anything to heart, really. (Josh: 21 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 10 insults)

I mean, it's not like very insulting, I don't think it should be insulting. It depends like the way you say it… [I]f we would be joking, you know, we'd be like “gay,” but not like “girl kissing another girl.” (18 year-old woman, non-native English speaking, Russian, white, heterosexual, Jewish, listed 6 insults)

It was as though participants thought that I would not have heard such things from other participants, and that I would judge them negatively for the pleasure they experienced with insults. Indeed, after a participant reported such games, I sometimes made a comment like, “That’s actually pretty common.” Following my normalization, a number of participants were more animated and described their experiences in more positive, rather than not negative, terms. Notably, I experienced a similar phenomenon in regard to participants’ attempts to express support for gay people (i.e., “I don’t have a problem with them”), which is explored further in Chapter 5.

For some not-negative participants there seemed to be an additional component to their lack of enthusiasm – an initial posturing period in which they acted disinterested and uninvolved (e.g., Miller & McFarland, 1991). After about 15 minutes of the interview, however, these reactions usually shifted, and participants displayed in the
interview how much they enjoyed teasing and verbal duels. They were often unable to contain their laughter as they described insult after insult they used with their friends. These responses were more consistent with the responses that deKlerk (1990) received to her study on the same topic.

Comments, both written and verbal (later) reflected astounding enthusiasm for the questionnaire, delight at being able to let go of linguistic inhibitions anonymously, and at the fact that some people are interested in the language of youth. (p. 596)

*Negative responses.* As discussed in the *Symmetrical insults* section, participants reported negative reactions to being insulted and hurt. The most common negative response was a return insult designed to create a symmetrical level of hurt or anger in the insulter. This response has been amply elaborated earlier, so I will not add illustrative excerpts here.

Another, less common, negative response was to make a direct and deliberate statement to the insulter that her or his actions were unacceptable.

Like I said, I don't usually surround myself with negative people with really bad insults and those who do I just ask them to either correct themselves or I just stop hanging around them. (Martin: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 35 insults)

[Cunt is] one I would have to do like a little check thing on like, “No, what are you doing? You can't say that to me!” (Vanessa: 19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 22 insults)

Directly and bluntly. It wouldn't be like a big conversation… I mean a big thing, I would just simply say, "I don't prefer to be referred to as that, that's very disrespectful. I have a name, please use it." Something straight and to the point like that, so they can understand. (18 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 23 insults)

This direct and assertive category of response was reported most frequently by African-American women. Other participants more commonly reported being passive in their responses to offensive and hurtful insults. It is important to keep in mind, however, Leets’ (2002) assertions about passive responses.

A passive response can be interpreted as either an empowered or weak position. For example, some people viewed their silence from a position of strength - "I wouldn't say anything back so as to not provoke this person any further. S/he obviously isn't worth the time of day"… - and others from a position of weakness: "I think that I would just walk away. I would feel bad but I'm not going to confront the person." (p. 356)

These variations within passive responses were apparent in the present study as well.

I would probably ignore them… Because I learned a long time ago that it really irritates people more when you show no response. (Finn: 19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 15 insults)

I like to kill people with kindness I guess. When people expect you to be like, bitch, blah, blah I like do it. I think that works even better, you know? It gets your point across.” (Katie: 18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 63 insults)
I mean, I'm better than that, why would I want to say [an insult] like that? (18 year-old woman, non-native English speaking, Russian, white, urban, heterosexual, Jewish, listed 6 insults)

Anything like, you know, somebody probably says, "Oh, you're such a jerk" or "You're an idiot" or something, you know?… You're just upset. It doesn't matter. You know?… I would be taken aback a little, at first. So, I would have a reaction to it. Then I would try to, you know, make it off as nothing, you know? (18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 11 insults)

Because I don't really feel that people who call me those words are really worth my time… I don't want to expend that energy. It's counterproductive. I could be doing a lot more things so I tend to catch it right at the beginning and throw it off my shoulder before like, you know, I get too upset because if I get too upset about anything then I'll really go off and say a bunch of things that I just don't really need to waste my time or energy doing. (Gina: 24 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 11 insults)

Another group of participants described negative responses that were not confrontational, but also were not passive.

In these cases, the targets removed themselves from the situation. In both excerpts, the participants were the insulters, and their targets walked away.

[Interviewer: Did he respond?] No. He kept walking out. I'm pretty much too intimidating sort of, to stay around. (26 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 9 insults)

…[H]e's actually gay, and we didn't take too kindly to it so we started, not verbally harassing him, but you could say, to kind of straighten him up. [Fag] was the one word that got under his skin…. Yeah, you could just tell cause he would throw insults back at us too but [when we would say fag] he would just stop and he would make up some ridiculous excuse like, “I gotta go home and get ready for work” or “I gotta go such and such.” He would just pretty much leave. (Jason: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 59 insults)

Finally, a small group of participants reported that they would physically assault an insulter if he used their trigger unacceptable word. Recall that Mike (Unacceptable words section) reported that he would hit someone who insulted his family.

Neutral responses. Some participants described a slightly different way that they responded to casual, friendly insults that they weren’t comfortable with. The most concise excerpt follows:

I have a friend and she'll be like, "Hey bitch, what's going on?" I'll be like, "hey."... (18 year-old woman, non-native English speaking Latina, Puerto Rican, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 8 insults)

In this excerpt, the participant does not confront the term she dislikes, but neither does she play along or respond in kind.

Others reported that having no response at all was the most desirable response. Their descriptions were similar to Garner’s (1983) analysis of “cool” in playing the dozens.
One aspect of cool means to be in control of the information one transmits… The second part of cool is based on projecting an image of composure by appearing detached or otherwise in possession of one's mental and emotional capabilities. To be effective the speaker must remain "poised." (p. 51)

Goffman (1959) labels this type of neutral response as “dramaturgical discipline.”

Actual affective response must be concealed and an appropriate affective response must be displayed. Teasing, it often seems, is an informal initiation device employed by a team to train and test the capacity of its new members to "take a joke," that is, to sustain a friendly manner while perhaps not feeling it. When an individual passes such a test of expression-control, whether he receives it from his new teammates in a spirit of jest or from an unexpected necessity of playing in a serious performance, he can thereafter venture forth as a player who can trust himself and be trusted by others. (p. 217)

An example of this kind of response was presented in the Intimidation/Distraction subsection earlier. Football players (and likely other athletes as well) needed to maintain their “cool” to be masculine, mature, and focused.

Other participants described other reasons to show no response to insults.

Even if someone outside would say something dumb about us, it don't mean nothing because we know. We have no low self-esteem about ourselves at all. (22 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 13 insults)

Because sometimes if somebody did it repeatedly, then you kind of get the hint, like oh, maybe they might not be joking, really. Like, they just getting a laugh out of everyone else, but they might actually be hurting your feelings. But, you don't want to show that, because you don't want to seem like you're petty like that. Every little thing you take personally…. Because I guess if somebody knows that it bothers you, then they can always use that. And, I don't want people to have that control over me, you know? (20 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 13 insults)

Misunderstandings

Most of the time, participants were accurate in their perceptions of their social situations – they knew what words and behavior were acceptable, they knew what tone and body language to use to convey their intent, and they accurately predicted how their targets would respond to their teasing and insults.

However, when misunderstandings were described, they further elaborated on the importance of each component of the model.

Several participants reported that, when they got angry, their mood disrupted their ability to read and to convey the appropriate cues with their insults.

I was really stressed out and I just needed to be alone so I was like going to go on a walk and then she like, she brought up some issue about like, like some annoying issue about like our apartment or something like that because she's my roommate too…. I was angry and sarcastic at the same time and it just like… in my head I was thinking that I wasn't saying something outrageous, but it was. (Lynn: 23 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 67 insults)
A few participants described a general difficulty in accurately conveying their intent. Often they identified a problem in conveying an identifiable joking or teasing tone. (They also refer again to potential violations of symmetry rules.)

I can say some really insulting and mean things, and to me, it's like I think that they know that I'm joking but I have a lot of sensitive friends. It's like, I'm always portrayed as the insensitive, mean one…. (Lisa: 19 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)

I don't even play because it's really hard for people to tell when I'm kidding anyway a lot of times so I don't even play with that. I just like people I've known for like 10 years, that's about how long it takes for someone to know when I'm kidding and when I'm not so... (Laura: 26 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 19 insults)

[Interviewer: Do you joke with insults with your girlfriend?] Yeah, that drives her crazy. She doesn't like that at all!… I mean, it's, I use fatty and like stuff, even if she's not fat. I just tease her about how she is and she gets so upset and I don't understand how she gets so upset so quickly about it…. We used to do that, too, with my friends in France, like, tease each other, so much that. It's a game for me. I'm so used to it. I got teased so many times. (Otis: 22 year-old man, non-native English-speaking, white, Greek, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 20 insults)

Finally, one participant provided an excellent example of misjudging the appropriateness of a target, using unacceptable words, and difficulty conveying intent. The result was misunderstanding and an apology.

Like, when I first moved into my apartment, one of my buddies moved in to a place down the road a little bit. And, he was like working, so I invited his girlfriend, and two of her friends came with her. And, we were sitting there joking and I said something to the one girl and she like flipped out on me, and I was like, whoa whoa, I was just kidding. Settle down a little bit. Like, I think it was, we were trying, [laughing] for whatever reason we thought we could get them to fight each other, and I just said [name] said you had nappy hair, and she was like, “What did you say?  Fuck you!” She like went nuts on me. So, I had to like, call her back the next day and be like “Look, I'm really sorry about that. I didn't mean to bother you, I was just trying to, joking around, I thought maybe, I'm really sorry.” She was just like, “Oh, okay, that's fine, it just really bothered me.” I was just like, “Oh, you've just got to kind of understand the way that we are, we're just like that a little bit.” She was like, “Oh, that's okay, just thanks for apologizing.” (Mike: 22 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 29 insults)
Chapter 5

Users and Targets of Sexual Orientation and Gender-Related Insults

When I began this study, I was concerned that students might censor their use of sexual orientation-related terms in the context of a one-on-one interview with an instructor who teaches a psychology of sexual orientation course. This concern proved unfounded. Twenty-eight participants initiated discussion regarding SOI’s with no specific prompting. For example,

[Interviewer: What kind of (insult) words do you use?] I mean, we call each other gay and ignorant, stupid and… all three of us know that it's never serious when we do it. (Marcus: 18 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 17 insults)

With 21 participants, I initiated discussion of the topic by referencing the SOI’s they had included on their insult lists. The remaining 23 participants had not listed any SOI’s on their lists, so I initiated discussion.

[Interviewer: Okay… when you were talking about not being manly, I don't see anything on here related to sexual orientation. A lot of people have listed gay or fag. Have you heard those used with your friends or in any context?] Sometimes it may be used in a class or something, but I don't normally hear my friends, unless they are talking about somebody who is just getting on their nerves like “faggot” or something, like a teacher or something. (19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 25 insults)

Even for participants who had not listed or discussed any SOI’s without prompting, there was quite a bit to say about the topic. A large portion of the participants appeared to have no hesitation about saying and using these terms in the course of the interview.

In addition to SOI’s, this chapter will address GRI’s. As discussed in Chapter 3, these two categories of insults are closely related. Indeed, they may serve the same functions and have similar effects on targets.

Language Used: Insulting versus Proper Terms

Table 5.1 lists all of the SOI’s and GRI’s that participants listed, discussed in their interviews, and discussed in focus groups. Notably, gay, lesbian, and homosexual appear on these lists, despite being considered “proper” or “politically correct” (gay and lesbian have been endorsed by the American Psychological Association [1994] as the preferred sexual orientation-related terms for psychologists to use). The appearance of these terms on the insult lists suggests that they have additional connotations that are accessed when they are used as insults.

A number of participants seemed to want to use a proper or acceptable term, but struggled to figure out what a proper term would be.

Honestly, I don't want to send them over the edge because you know people that are dykes, uh, lesbians, faggots, well, gays, whatever, some of them have a lot of inner issues with their sexuality
and with who they are. (Lanelle: 21 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 23 insults)

[Interviewer: Gay is not one of the five worst insults?] Fag would be, and dyke would be, but gay, I don’t use it. I think it’s okay. I mean, it’s not their title, I guess, they’re homosexuals, but I guess you would be insulted by that, but it’s not one of the five worst to me. (Shandra: 18 year-old woman, African-American, heterosexual, no religion, listed 15 insults)

That would be bad to call him a faggot; gay might be okay. Because he is gay. Isn’t that okay to say to gay people? Like, “Oh, you’re gay?” Well, not really. I don’t know, I don’t really have that many conversations with gay people. I never call them a faggot or anything though. (Alex: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 25 insults)

I guess the PC term would be, for it, would be homosexual, I guess. Or, I guess, if you are making fun of somebody, you know what I mean, you can say, “That person’s gay.” Just talking bad about somebody. But, it can be used also just to mean – I guess that would be kind of be an offensive word either way you use it, I guess. (Bobby: 24 year-old man, white, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 35 insults)

It was striking that several of these participants had gay friends, yet they had no comfortable vocabulary for discussing sexual orientation. In contrast, the majority of participants had a readily accessible vocabulary of offensive or insulting terms to use. In particular, these terms were popular for targeting men.

An overwhelming majority of the SOI’s and GRI’s were specific to men (83% of the terms in Table 5.1), and most participants agreed that those terms were nonsensical when directed towards women. Participants described the meaning and impact of these insults directed towards men as being different from those directed towards women, so the sexes are addressed separately in this chapter.

Insults Towards Men

As presented in Chapter 3, the three most frequent SOI’s and GRI’s were fag, pussy, and gay, which were also frequent in the field data. According to interview participants, the acceptability of using these terms as insults depended in part on the sexual orientation of the target.

Insults directed towards gay and bisexual men. The majority of participants identified SOI’s as inappropriate to direct towards gay people, highlighting some of the social rules discussed in Chapter 4, such as the inappropriateness of targeting someone’s core identity, and insults needing to be false or exaggerated to be funny.

But I like gay people. It's not like... when I say it I don't mean anything by their sexuality or something and I would never say it to a gay guy that he's a fag. I would feel bad if I said that so... Because I think that would hurt them because it would mean literally like. (Hiro: 18 year-old man, non-native English speaker, Asian, Japanese, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 21 insults)

Yeah, but like, if a friend of mine was gay… I would never use the word faggot around him, even if I was on a comfort level... that's like somebody using the "n" word, the negative "n" word, around me all the time. That's just their background and who they are, and they can't change that, like I can't change being black... I wouldn't use something they can't change against them cause
that's just wrong… I use it around my friends who aren't... We used to use the word faggot around each other all the time or call each other faggot, or you're gay, or something like that, but we know they're not. (Martin: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 35 insults)

I would never like call him [a bisexual friend] like a fag or something like that or whatever. I wouldn't be abusive about it… How would it be abusive? Because society kinda determines what's really mean to say and what isn't and… it's pretty much like universal, it's like accepted as really offensive. (Laura: 26 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 19 insults)

Homo, fag [are the worst insults] because, I don't know, making fun of sexual orientation just seems wrong to me. Because it's not their choice. It's a chemical imbalance in their brain. (Finn: 19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 15 insults)

Finn’s use of “chemical imbalance” combined with other subtle derogatory comments during his interview demonstrate that being gay-affirmative or supportive is not necessarily a precursor to feeling SOI’s are inappropriate.

For the gay focus group participants, determining the appropriateness or offensiveness of SOI’s was more complex. For these men, SOI use fell into three major categories: 1) SOI’s used as insider (in-group) terms among LGB people; 2) SOI’s used in anti-gay verbal attacks; and 3) SOI’s overheard being used among heterosexuals.

In-group use. Several heterosexual interview participants acknowledged that sexual orientation-related term use among LGB people is distinct from heterosexual use of SOI’s.

Another friend of mine for like ten years, he’s gay, and he’s always been gay, and he calls himself a fag, but I don’t feel like I could call him that. Do you know what I mean? Because it’s like, kinda like a brotherhood amongst his like, gay friends. Something like that. Even though I’ve known him longer than any of his other friends combined. It’s kind of like, since I’m not in that culture, I can’t go there, you know what I mean? (Laura: 26 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 19 insults)

I’ve met lots of homosexuals, for example, who will use it as, you know, only around other homosexuals, you know, as a term of, God, I don’t know what, but it’s not derogatory, you know? Like, “That fag.” A homosexual saying to another homosexual about a celebrity homosexual or something like that, you know? I guess that’s not related to me, but I understand there are ways that it can’t be awful just by virtue of being the word fag. (Gerald: 23 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 20 insults)

Among the focus group participants, there were disparate views of the meaning and appropriate use of these terms among LGB people.

[Interviewer: What do you all think about the word queer?] [Suresh:] Stupid… Just because we don’t like something that you do, that doesn’t make us non-conventional or something like that…. Like in a homosexual man, to some extent I can even tolerate fag, even though that wouldn’t be exactly respectful in any sense, but queer is just senseless to me…. [Dave:] I think today most people just identify queer, meaning gay, not straight. Part of the gay-lesbian community, the A through Z club or whatever you want to call it… And, I think it’s been taken to be used as an empowering word… [Mark:] Yeah, it’s kind of
like that for me too... I mean, I don’t tend to ever use that word, but that’s not really for a reason. And, I think it’s good because it’s like encompassing of gay and lesbian and bisexual and all of that. (Focus Group Participants: Suresh: 22 year-old man, non-native English speaker, Asian, Indian, urban, gay, Hindu; Dave, 22 year-old man, white, suburban, gay, agnostic; and, Mark: 20 year-old man, white, urban, gay, no religion)

[Interviewer: Can you tell me what fag means in that context?] [Dave:] A homosexual... Yeah, it’s like, we take the word that is used to insult us by other people, and turn it around, and we use it as a power word for our group. I don’t want to say community, because sometimes in the gay and lesbian community, people who do hear words like that will just be like, what did you say?... [Suresh:]... I’ve never been in a gay group or like, I usually don’t hang out with a bunch of gay people. So, there never was a question of what you call each other like, what you tend to get offended to. So, I guess I can’t say that. [Mark:] I never really thought of the different connotations of the word fag. But, I don’t think that I’ve ever really considered it to be empowering. Like ever. Because, I think if it’s among like a group of gay people, and you say that somebody is a big fag, or if a straight person who knows that I’m gay is like, “That guy’s a big fag,” then it makes me think that he’s like, really flaming and maybe kind of slutty. So, like, it doesn’t really seem like it’s good to me in any circumstance. (Focus Group Participants Dave, Suresh, and Mark)

These excerpts reveal that even when SOI’s are used by “insiders” as shorthand for a sub-cultural stereotype or to convey comfort and empowerment, the LGB person using the term runs a risk of offending or insulting an LGB person that is not part of their group. In addition, Mark’s excerpt highlights that gay men are not necessarily less attached to masculine ideals than heterosexual men; Mark used the term flaming in a disparaging way in the excerpt. Additionally, Suresh later specifically stated his discomfort with effeminate gay men.

In a sense, if I were to hear someone say something anti-gay, I would, well, I definitely wouldn't like that, but on my part I'm definitely not too comfortable with very effeminate people myself, no offense to anyone here. It's just something that I'm not, I can't be too cool about that.... Even though I know what effeminate people go through, and yet I have those reservations against them, so I feel I'm, it wouldn't be fair on my part to blame [insulters] for what they're doing... You know, it's something you laugh at, it makes things easy, makes people like you... But, that knowledge [about myself] is embarrassing. (Focus Group Participant Suresh)

Dave and Becky also described the negative reactions of gay men towards effeminate men.

Sometimes [gay brother] will joke around actually, about some of his friends that are more feminine. He'll be like, “They’re just being little fairies” or whatever. Because he’s not really feminine at all. If you saw him walking down the street you couldn’t tell... The more feminine ones are usually the ones that get picked on. (Becky: 22 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 13 insults)

Usually it's like, one of my friends when he gets a little bit, you know, effeminate, then, “Queen.” Just like, things like that. It's not an insult, well, yeah, in that case it is an insult. (Focus Group Participant Dave)

Throughout this chapter, participants reference the importance of masculinity in men; it is important to keep in mind that many gay men share these standards, regardless of whether heterosexual men feel gay men can meet the standards (Connell, 1992).
Verbal attacks. Focus group participants reported a number of instances of SOI’s used in anti-gay verbal attacks. For example,

I was walking across the street on campus, with one of my friends who makes me look straight [everyone laughing]. We were walking and this jeep, we think it’s frat boys because it’s a jeep, it’s a bunch of guys, looks like they work out every day [everyone laughing]. They yell, “You suck dick!” And, I’m like, “Duh.” [everyone laughing]. (Focus Group Participant Dave)

…[T]he other day, I was walking past this guy and like, there wasn't really anybody else around, and he mumbled something about faggot something or other, and like, I couldn't really tell what he said, but I'm sure he was talking about me. And he was, I don't know, just disgruntled about the fact that there's gay people around, I guess. [everyone laughing]. (Focus Group Participant Mark)

It was striking that focus group participants were laughing (as was the interviewer) as they relayed and listened to these stories; the same phenomenon occurred with the women. Our laughter will be addressed in the Target Response subsection.

Both focus group participants who did not specifically hide their sexual orientations (Mark and Dave) had been targeted in anti-gay verbal attacks on multiple occasions in the past year alone. However, they both reported that the majority of the occasions on which they heard SOI’s were, in fact, when they overheard presumed heterosexual men addressing them to each other. These reports were consistent with interview participants’ reports of refraining from use of SOI’s towards known gay or bisexual men, and frequent use towards their presumed heterosexual friends.

Terms Directed Towards Heterosexual Men

The majority of participants not only knew, but also used, SOI’s and GRI’s with their friends. I asked these participants to help me understand what they meant when they used such terms. Table 5.2 shows the list of synonyms generated by participants for the SOI’s and GRI’s that they used.

Peer pressure. The most commonly referenced use of SOI’s and GRI’s was in response to a friend refusing or hesitating to go along with a friendship group on any particular issue. In this category of use, the SOI’s and GRI’s appear to serve a coercive function.

When someone says, “You’re acting like a fag,” cause maybe you don’t wanna do something and it might be something that they see it as some easy thing or whatever, and you don’t wanna do it, and they’re calling you a fag because you’re weak. Or you look like somebody that is too scared to do anything… I don’t know, it just means you act soft, or you act stupid, or you’re just not cool. Sometimes it means that you’re just not cool. (Nathan: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 51 insults)

I'd call somebody a bitch. If they don't want to do something and you kind of try to peer pressure them into doing it they are like, "Don't be a bitch" or "Don't be a pussy." I use those two. (Bobby: 24 year-old man, white, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 35 insults)
It’s usually just, you know, you disagree with something that they’re talking about, so, “What are you, gay?” … Or, you know, if someone’s not doing what you want to do. Like, if you want to get something and they’re like, “No, I don’t want to,” it’s like, “Oh, you fag, come on!” (Nick: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 14 insults)

These excerpts support Plummer’s (2001) finding that "homophobia targets anything that signifies a lack of allegiance to the collective expectations of male peers - it is much more than heterosexism or a variant of misogyny or a ‘simple’ prejudice against homosexuals” (Plummer, 2001, p. 21).

Gender role. The next group of excerpts focuses more specifically on either being “like a girl” or not “acting like a guy.” In these cases, targets are violating acceptable behaviors for men, rather than solely violating the general expectations or desires of their friends. This category of use of SOI’s appears to be the insulter’s attempt to correct the behavior of the target.

Like if somebody makes a comment like, “Oh, she’s so cute!” You’d say like, “Faggot!” Or, some guy is sad, or, not being a man… Yes, you know, the stereotype of being a man. (20 year-old man, non-native English speaker, Latino, Venezuelan, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 22 insults)

I play classical guitar, so I usually have long fingernails, and I broke one… and it hurt, you know. I was like, “Oh shit.” “You fucking fag, cut your nails!”, you know, that kind of thing. That's pretty much when you use it. When somebody just whines or complains about something. (Joel: 26 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Jewish, listed 46 insults)

Well, I have called my brother-in-law gay, but that is only because he acts like a girl as far as getting dressed, he takes long… A lot of times it will be either me or him we waiting on. I'm like, "You's a girl. You straight gay." (22 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 13 insults)

Like, "Oh, you're gay" or something like that, if he's talking to his girlfriend. Like, "I love you" or something. You'd just say, "Oh, that's gay" you know, kind of joking around like that… More feminine kind of, more sensitive, caring. I don't know. It's kind of like a thing guys have in front of each other, you know. You don't want to say that in front of your other guy friends just because they are joking around about it… I am sure pretty much every guy does it for the most part. He'll tell his girlfriend he loves her and stuff like that, and you know, when you do it in front of your friends it's kind of, it's just something you don't do. You don't say sweet stuff. (Bobby: 24 year-old man, white, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 35 insults)

Bobby’s excerpt in particular highlights that the gender content of SOI’s can supersede the sexual orientation content. The target in this case is too demonstrative with his girlfriend, so his friends are not implying that he is literally gay. Instead, the target is being feminine or unmanly by openly expressing his emotions, and by inappropriately dropping the façade he is required to present to male friends. Armstrong (1997) identified a similar example.

I find it particularly noteworthy and ironic that the speaker could “demean” his friend for preferring to go out with a woman (a fairly heterosexual thing to do) in an attempt to coerce the
victim into engaging in a homosocial activity, such as playing touch football. However, in all-male
groups, hanging around with the guys is often valued above heterosocial activities like dating.
What all these instances share in common is the implication that “manly” behavior (i.e., drinking,
playing sports, driving fast) is valued, while stereotypically feminine behavior should be avoided.
(Armstrong, 1997, pp. 331-332)

Sexual connotations. One focus group participant hypothesized that SOI’s and GRI’s serve a comforting or
reassuring function.

And, so I think when they call their friends fags, or they're like, “You're such a fag,” it's like
constant reassurance that they're straight…. So, when you like, keep making fun of gay people and
like, calling your friends fags, and that's ever so offensive for them, then that reassures everybody
that like, we're all straight here. (Focus Group Participant Mark)

Armstrong (1997) argued a similar point: “By referring to others as ‘homos’ or ‘fags’ in these contexts, the speakers
are referencing their own heterosexuality and masculinity, while coercing the referents to adopt the same values” (p.
330).

It was striking that the least common synonyms for SOI’s and GRI’s directly referenced the target’s sexual
interests or behaviors. Indeed, this type of meaning was only rarely mentioned.

Like there was one instance where one of his friends was like, dancing and he was at a bar and
was really drunk and he… was dancing with this Mexican guy up on stage and they were just
imitating each other. And he's like "Get down, you homo!" Like kidding around because he's like
seen dancing with some... [Interviewer: ...a guy?] I mean it was a joke, but yeah, like situations
like that. (Brittany: 22 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 21 insults)

Generic use. Aside from the gender and sexual orientation connotations of SOI’s and GRI’s, a large group
of participants seemed to find these terms to be good generic insults for people who were bothering them in a non-
specific way.

[Interviewer: Do your friends use fag, gay, homo, very much?] Yeah, somewhat. That’s kind of
on the same lines as calling someone like, an asshole. It’s like, a name. (Josh: 21 year-old man,
white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 10 insults)

[In high school, the word gay] was more just a word that they used for like, he’s a freak, he’s just
an outcast, nobody really likes him. (Mike: 22 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual,
Catholic, listed 29 insults)

It [gay] is usually seen as the same way as saying loser or dork. In other words, they wouldn’t take
really that much more offense to it. (Cole: 20 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual,
Christian, listed 32 insults)

When one of my friends does something really stupid, and they just look stupid, I’m like, “You’re
so gay.” [Interviewer: So, it’s not that you’ve just done something that appears homosexual?] No,
it’s like, “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen.” (Lisa: 19 year-old woman, white, suburban,
heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)
**Differences between terms.** The two most frequent SOI’s, *fag* and *gay*, clearly have significant overlap in meaning. However, participants also generally agreed that *gay* is mild compared to *fag*.

I think faggot is, I think that’s a little stronger, a little harsher than using gay. (21 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, LDS, listed 28 insults)

This distinction between the two terms is also exemplified in the film *8 Mile*, in which the main character (Jimmy, a.k.a. “B-Rabbit”) distinguishes between *gay* and *faggot* in a freestyle rap battle. Paul, referred to in the segment, is known to be gay, and the rap is directed towards a man who is heterosexual and has been harassing Paul (also in the form of a rap).

Okay, folks, enough with the gay jokes, especially from a gay broke bitch yourself, hello…. Fucking homo, little maggot, you can't hack it. Paul's gay, you're a faggot. At least he admits it, don't even risk it…. Why you fucking with the gay guy G, when really you're the one who got the HIV. Now, I'm done with this clown; he's soft. Fuck it, I'll let home girl finish you off. (Iovine, Grazer & Hanson, 2002)

In addition to *gay* appearing less harsh than *faggot* (and perhaps *homo* and *soft*), the excerpt implies that *gay* might mean a man with a homoerotic orientation, whereas *faggot* can be used towards a heterosexual who is contemptible (though he uses *gay* earlier in the same way). It is notable that the rap star who played B-Rabbit is Marshall Mathers (“Eminem”). The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) has protested promotions and awards for this rap artist’s albums because they contain “the most blatantly offensive, homophobic lyrics GLAAD has ever seen” (Garry, 2000). Though the language in the excerpt is insulting and offensive, it is interesting that the words were used to ostensibly stand up for a gay man under attack.

Another distinction between the terms *gay* and *fag* is that *fag* was usually reserved for men, whereas *gay* also quite frequently referred to objects or events. Armstrong (1997) found very generalized uses of the term *gay*.

In this research the most frequently recorded homophobic usage was to employ the term *gay* to refer to any object, possession, attribute, or behavior of others, in their presence or not, deemed by the user to be nonnormative…. [M]any young people will refer to almost anything or anybody as "gay" if they disapprove of it or find it "uncool" or odd. Thus, in this region, at least, young people have expropriated the preferred neutral sexual identity marker for males with a homoerotic orientation and, through connotative extension, given it a negative value. (Armstrong, 1997, p. 329)

Most participants in the present study provided examples of this type of use, with general agreement on the intended meaning (the *Generically Negative* portion of Table 5.2).
Now, gay, I guess, between two heterosexual people is, translates to mean un-cool, or dumb, or not fun, you know. Like, you could say, “That party was gay,” you know? Like, it's not cool, that party is gay… oh, that dance club is gay, I don't want to go there. So, I mean, it can be used to describe different situations. And, it translates to mean, like dumb, or not cool, or “No, I don't want to do that.” (Brian: 19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)

Like, we see a car, it doesn’t look good, it doesn’t have anything good under their hood, engine sucks, everything sucks, it looks gay. It’s messed up, you know, it doesn’t look good, it’s gay. (Len: 20 year-old man, non-native English speaker, white, Lithuanian, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 6 insults)

Everything's gay, this looks gay, that looks gay, this sounds gay, this is gay, that movie was gay, that was the gayest thing ever. This lecture is gay, everything is gay. But, it never means gay, it always means stupid. Always. (Focus Group Participant Liz: 21 year-old woman, white, urban, lesbian, Wiccan)

The extension of gay to objects or events does appear to primarily be a white phenomenon. Several African-American participants reported that this is a usage that they are familiar with, but do not use, and have not heard their African-American friends use either.

I don't personally see too many black people saying gay. I know white people use it a lot. Like, “Oh, that movie was so gay.” I be like, okay. We don't use that. Black people use, like, oh, that movie wasn't nothing… it wasn't worth one thing, it was trash. (Melina: 21 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, A.M.E., listed 13 insults)

[Interviewer: Or like, “That movie was so gay.” Do you all use that?] I’d be like, “That movie was gay? What do you mean? Was you happy about it? What do you mean?” (18 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 12 insults)

[Interviewer: What would be the black equivalent of using gay that way?] You could say whack basically… It just means something that's not cool basically. (20 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 13 insults)

A similar racial divide exists with the term punk, which carries gender and sexual orientation connotations among African-Americans, but not among white participants. Bruhn and Murray (1985) documented use and meaning of punk in playing the dozens. “To say something about another person's mother that is true or to call someone a punk (a homosexual) are often precursors to a physical fight” (Bruhn & Murray, 1985, p. 488). Punk is also among the abusive terms highlighted in the 1991 film Tongues Untied, a documentary about the experiences and identity challenges of African-American gay men. However, African-American participants in the present study used the term with more gender-related connotations than sexual orientation-related ones.

Punk, yeah, I use that. I think I would use coward, if you're a punk, you're a coward. You're scared, you're afraid, you're a punk. (Shandra: 18 year-old woman, African-American, heterosexual, no religion, listed 15 insults)

I have a little nephew, he's like a freshman in high school and he plays football, and every time I see him get run over I call him a punk or something like that, you know, just to mess with him…. (27 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 10 insults)
White participants did not use this term except in reference to people who dressed like punk rockers (a distinct social and fashion subtype related to the punk music phenomenon).

One other significant difference between terms is that, in contrast to SOI’s, no participant stated a caution or hesitation about using a GRI in front of an LGB person. This suggests that, though GRI’s were listed as synonyms to SOI’s (e.g., pussy, soft, bitch, girl, weak), they did not carry the same level of taboo as SOI’s.

SOI’s and GRI’s are multi-layered terms. Plummer (1998) metaphorically described these insults as onions, because they seem to accumulate overlapping layers of meaning, creating a shorthand perhaps, for all of the meanings listed in Table 5.2. What these terms do not include is any positive connotation for the heterosexual participants interviewed. Yet, it was my perception that a number of the participants had gay friends and felt relatively positively towards gay people. Thus, the next section explores the intersections of attitudes and the use of SOI’s and GRI’s.

Attitudes towards gay and bisexual men. The variety of uses and intents associated with SOI’s was matched by a variety of attitudes towards LGB people. Because this was not a study specifically designed to measure attitudes, 10 participants did not reveal their attitudes in their interviews and they were not pushed to describe them. There were also two LGB participants, one gay man and one bisexual woman, both of whom were comfortable with and supportive of the LGB community. I have not included them in the sections below.

Supportive participants. There were 20 participants who expressed support for gay and bisexual people, of whom 13 (65%) were women.

[Interviewer: What do you think that most of the people in your group think about gay people?] Most of us are pretty accepting… Because of my background, and the fact that I’m not the most normal person in the world. I tend to associate with people who can think for themselves and are open-minded. (Joel: 26 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Jewish, listed 46 insults)

[Talking with her brother:] I’ll ask him, you know, like, “Why are you using [gay] in such a way?… Is it that you’re better than them?” You know, and I’ll really get on his nerves… If that’s your opinion, fine, but leave everybody else out of it, you know?… I don’t like him saying it… I think he’s just mean. (18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 11 insults)

But, my dad used to always tell me, just try to instill values that regardless of sexual preference or ethnicity that everyone’s equal. And, I feel like he’s done a pretty good job. (Josh: 21 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 10 insults)

I know a lot of [homosexual] people, not a lot, but… I’ve certainly met… enough nice people that it just seems like. You just look at history and you put yourself anywhere in history where there’s been such a great struggle for equality that, I mean, to me it’s just like, how could you possibly stand in the way of, you know, their awful struggle? I mean, I even get offended by people who
use it [SOI’s] casually at times, and I’m probably not as confrontational as I could be about it, you know, as far as voicing my concern with it, but I weed out my friends accordingly. You know, at least. (Gerald: 23 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 20 insults)

Gerald’s excerpt was the most directly supportive and empathic among the participants. Earlier in his interview, he used a strategy of expressing support for LGB people that was employed by multiple participants: “I don’t have a problem with homosexuals…” Indeed, most participants who seemed to feel positively towards gay people expressed those feelings as not negative.

[Interviewer: What do you think about homosexuality?] Not, I mean, I have no problem with it. And, sometimes it bugs me when the guys say fag…it upsets me. (20 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 16 insults)

…I have a few friends who are gay and they’re still nice people. (19 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 21 insults)

I done tried to be down with everybody who is gay, and I think gay people are the funniest people. I mean, we get down, they made me laugh so hard. They have laughs, and I love them for that. I don’t have a problem, know what I mean. (Melina: 21 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, A.M.E., listed 13 insults)

Supportive participants were much less likely to use SOI’s than participants in other categories of revealed attitudes (supportive: 35% used, ambivalent and disapproving: 90% used, \( z = -4.18, p = .000 \)). Eleven supportive participants (55%) did not list any SOI’s (compared to 31% of the overall sample who did not list any SOI’s, \( z = -1.929, p = .026 \)).

I've heard [gay meaning stupid] but I don't use that because still it's like you're playing on somebody, because a gay person might … hear you say that it's like, "Wait a minute, you know." I don't even like that term gay. It's, I don't like it. … I don't like nigger, so I don't like gay. I mean, people use that to identify themselves and they seem like they have no problem with it at times but I still feel like, I mean, it's just like some black people they'll say, "That that's my nigger," you know, and they'll say it and they don't feel offended, but I do. So, that's why I don't like using it. (Tiffani: 19 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 20 insults)

[Interviewer: Okay, and why don't you use gay or fag or queer?] Because, I think it’s mean. Because I have no problem with gay people at all and I think just using those terms is just mean. Like especially at a bar you could just be saying it, just joking, but then somebody who's gay could be standing right next to you and take offense to it. So I don't use it personally, I hate the way it sounds. (Stephanie: 21 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 10 insults)

[Interviewer: Why don’t you use any of the sexual orientation terms?] I don't want to insult anybody. Sometimes I say things like, "Oh, he is kooky" instead. (26 year-old man, non-native English speaker, Latino, Columbian, urban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 11 insults)

Note that Tiffani had so strongly associated gay with a negative meaning that she equated it to nigger and appeared unaware of any positive connotations (or history) of the word.
Thirty-five percent of supportive participants did use SOI’s. Most of these participants tried to be careful about the contexts in which they used them. However, Gina reported it was sometimes difficult to entirely stop using SOI’s, regardless of how awful she considered those terms.

Sometimes I'll like, let it slip and …I'll be like, "This is so gay." Not meaning that something is homosexual just meaning like, you know, it's dumb or it's stupid or whatever. I have a lot of friends who are homosexual and … used as an insult is just like really hurtful in my mind… (Gina: 24 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 11 insults)

The best man in my wedding… is a gay black man. And, he hung out with my group of friends for a long time. And, in his presence I never heard anything like [gay, fag, or homo]. Which I thought was kind of interesting. Like, “Alright, you guys can hold back when there's one in the room, hunh? Alright.” (Joel: 26 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Jewish, listed 46 insults)

Ambivalent participants. The largest group of participants (N=34) was ambivalent with regard to LGB people. These participants seemed to find two issues salient: 1) their need to portray themselves as fair and unprejudiced, and 2) their discomfort and/or lack of exposure to gay people.

I mean he's always been one to do things out of the ordinary. But, we weren't like, “Alright, you're gay, you're not our friend anymore.” We were like, “You're gay?! What's wrong with you man??” You know. It wasn't meant to like push him aside and just forget about him. It was, in a really weird and sick way, I guess, it was like trying to make our friendship closer. (Jason: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 59 insults)

I play like that, you know, “Hey, what's up?” And smack them on the butt or something and they'll [his presumed heterosexual friends] call me gay. It's cool. It's funny when they say it to me. Then somebody will grab me and I'll kind of get offended like, “What are you doing?” You know what I'm saying? I know I'm not gay and I don't know what everybody else is so. So, it's kind of funny. [laughing] [Interviewer: So, it gets offensive if you think it might be real?] No. Actually it doesn't. That's actually, that's cool. I have a gay friend. Actually, I have four or five gay friends. Yeah. (Dante: 18 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 12 insults)

Both of the above excerpted participants appeared uncomfortable, but were determined to state their support – or at least lack of opposition. Gough (2002) described similar self-presentations in his focus group of heterosexual men at a university.

In responding to his friend's polite interrogations and the dilemmas posed, Trev attempts to position himself simultaneously as traditionally masculine and progressively tolerant. Humour is used as a device which enables the taboo (homophobic) statements to be articulated but read as innocuous, thereby helping to protect the speaker from accusations of prejudice. (p. 229)

Another issue raised by ambivalent participants (and referenced in Dante’s above excerpt) was concern about being the target of a sexual advance from a gay or bisexual man. Sometimes, participants referenced this issue as though they needed to assuage the interviewer’s fears.

I'm good friends with him, and he doesn't act gay, or the stereotypical gay, he just acts like an average guy. It's just that he has a different sexual orientation than I do, I mean, he doesn't ever
force it on me or anything like that. (Brian: 19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)

[Interviewer: What if that friend really had turned out to be gay?] I'd probably, I'd probably still be friends with him. I don't care, I mean, if you're gay it doesn't bother me. I mean he would never try to hit on me because he knows that I'm straight. (Alex: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 25 insults)

Previous literature provides numerous other examples of these sexual concerns. Gough’s (2002) focus group participants frequently referenced fear of a sexual advance from a gay man. He observed,

The gay other is imbued with potential power and strength, a common enough depiction in heterosexual folklore - consider, for example, heterosexual fear and nervous joking provoked by a jail sentence, joining the navy, attending public school, etc. - and one which conflicts, ironically, with equally popular images of gay men as effeminate and weak…. (p. 227)

It was against this cultural backdrop that participants professed their tolerance of gay people; their assurances to me appeared to be automatic and reactive to the characterization of gay men as dangerous (as opposed to reactive to any apparent concern on my part). In addition, through responding to the potential for a sexual advance in this way, participants ensured that I was aware of their heterosexuality.

Among ambivalent participants, 30 (88%) reported that they used SOI’s, and 25 (74%) listed at least one SOI. Most used these terms unselfconsciously, though several did acknowledge that they try to be more careful about SOI use in front of LGB people. Generally, ambivalent participants had very little concern or internal conflict regarding their use of these terms.

I call her a soccer fag, which is kind of funny because both of us played soccer on the same team. But, she’s a soccer fag and I’m not. [shrugs] (Finn: 19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 15 insults)(85)

One of my friend’s guardians are lesbians, so… [she] doesn’t like fag. But, fag doesn’t even seem like that bad, but I guess they don’t like it, I guess. I don’t know why… It’s not really over the line, you know, it’s just one individual person that’s not liking it. (Hiro: 18 year-old man, non-native English speaker, Asian, Japanese, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 21 insults)

Like, usually like somebody like walking down the street, and he just walks a certain way and like, “Oh, that’s a fag, he’s gay.” (Vanessa: 19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 22 insults)

There were four ambivalent participants who reported that they did not use SOI’s. Their rationales were quite similar to those of the supportive participants. All described specific experiences that had shifted their previous views.

I guess I have a greater respect for people who choose to be gay or whatever because I used to work with a gay guy… I got a greater respect for him because you know, I got to know him as a person... When I was growing up, based on my family and stuff, yeah I'm sure I used [sexual orientation-related insults] harshly. I guess I was mean to those type of people. But now it's like,
I'm accepting of them and their lifestyle. But I still do have a problem with it being in my own little family [she previously talked about suggestions that her 5-year-old son might be gay], I guess that has to do with how I grew up. But it's slowly changing. (23-year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 10 insults)

I don't say [sexual orientation-related terms]. I try to get them not to, you know? Because I did used to say that, like probably before coming here, because I wasn't really too aware of, you know, anybody that was homosexual and stuff like that… [B]ut when I got here and they had a few talks and stuff like about it. You know, like you never know who's what so after that I just stopped. It wasn't really too cool. (James: 19-year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 11 insults)

James specifically referenced “talks” as making him aware of the impact SOI’s can have on LGB people. When I inquired further, he described a one-hour seminar conducted by the University’s Women’s Center during freshman orientation; he accidentally attended twice. James was the only interview participant to report an impact of formal education on his choices regarding SOI’s.

Uncomfortable and disapproving participants. There were six participants who expressed strong discomfort or disapproval regarding gay and bisexual men, in particular.

I was like, okay, you have a different sexuality preference. That's not a problem with me, but they felt that they had to prove ten times more than a woman that they were like women. So, it's kind of like, “Oh, he's fine, ain't he?” And a woman will just look, you know, women are good at looking and they'll just go back to what they've got to do… But then it's like… They were open about talking about how sexy a man was and, “Um, um, um” and stuff like that and I'm like. You know, you don't have to prove to anybody that you're gay. If you are, I mean, that's just your preference, but they made it everybody's business and that was kind of disturbing. (Tyler: 21-year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 10 insults)

…[H]omosexuality to a lot of people is weird… You just kind of see people doing that as kind of crazy and I'm going to stay away from you, type of thing. I think saying, “Dude, that’s gay,” is kind of conveying those emotions. Like, that’s weird, let’s stay away from that. (21-year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Christian, listed 18 insults)

I mean like, you know, they look too long. They be looking at you like, “What are you staring at? You gay ass, I'm going to beat your ass!” It be stuff like that. I have done it like, towards gay people, but I haven’t done it like, in their face…. Gay people I do know, like my friends, I’ll say something like behind their back, but I won’t say it to their face. It’s kind of mean saying it behind your back, but the gay people that I do know that are my “friends” [makes gesture of quotes], I don’t like them that much anyway, so. (Alfred: 19-year-old man, biracial, heterosexual, urban, Baptist, listed 15 insults)

The Human Rights Campaign Fund (Birch, 2002) holds National Coming Out Day each year because of the belief that the more people learn they have gay friends and family, the more positive societal attitudes will become.

Indeed, Herek (2003) and Hinrichs and Rosenberg (2002) have found that the contacts must be positive for the attitude benefit to occur. The excerpts from Tyler and Alfred highlight the impact of negative contacts. Tyler had a gay brother who looked a lot like him, so he was sensitized to being mistaken for his gay brother (and thus, being
more vulnerable to a sexual advance). In addition, the gay men he described above were his boss and co-workers, so he needed to hide his discomfort from them at risk of his job. For Alfred, his religion was the most salient aspect of his identity, so he felt supported in his disapproval by his religion, which meshed well with his perception of his clean and moral lifestyle in contrast to others (his perception of himself also formed an interesting combination with his favorite pastime of insulting passersby). For these participants, their exposure to gay people both reinforced their previous disapproval and sensitized them to new worries (fear of sexual advance, in particular). Still, in the above excerpt, Tyler also demonstrates his need to be seen as non-prejudiced.

All of the participants with uncomfortable or disapproving attitudes used SOI’s and GRI’s without concern; four listed at least one SOI. They were all, however, careful to state that they do not direct such terms audibly towards LGB people (as stated in Alfred’s excerpt, above).

**Target Responses**

One focus group participant made the provocative statement that straight men are much more offended by SOI’s and GRI’s than gay men.

> You telling him don’t be a fag, that’s not going to bother me so much because I think… you’re just saying that out of ignorance… so I’m not going to be as bothered. But, a straight person hearing that sort of a comment is definitely going to be insecure about his sexuality hearing that from another straight person. Because he’s going to think, “Oh my God, am I turning into one of them?”  (Focus Group Participant Suresh)

Most heterosexual men participants believed the opposite for teasing usage (see Chapter 4, Target Responses, Positive subsection), but acknowledged that SOI’s and GRI’s could provoke a physical fight between heterosexual men when used in a hostile context (Negative subsection).

Gay men. A number of heterosexual participants made guesses as to how a gay person might react to their uses of SOI’s. Several of these guesses were presented earlier in this chapter as part of the participant’s reasons for not directing SOI’s towards gay or bisexual men, usually for fear of offending or hurting the target. Additionally, Gina imagined a hopeless and depressed reaction from an LGB target.

> I just kind of put myself in their place and they have to deal with being different all the time and having that called out and used as an insult is just like, really hurtful in my mind. And, I know that if I were them, it would probably really, really upset me. Not like I’m mad at you, but as in, kind of like, I want to curl up in a fetal position and cry because there’s nothing I can do about this.  (Gina: 24 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 11 insults)
However, gay men focus group participants described markedly different reactions (from both heterosexual speculation and from each other) to such verbal harassment. For example, Mark describes his reaction to another anti-gay verbal attack.

I ran across the street right before a car was going to go through the light, and they shouted, “Queer!” out the window, and I was like, [mumbles] “That’s cool…” But, yeah, it was like, awesome [laughing]… If they’re in a car and they’re speeding away, and I’m like, well, that’s convenient for you because then I don’t get to say anything, but, yeah… [laughing] I tend to just ignore people who say those things. I think because… I’m so shocked that they just said that. Because I’m like, I can’t believe that people are like that. And it takes me a second to like, register what they just said and what their intent was… because it just catches me off guard. So, then I feel like, by the time I catch myself, I might think of something to say, it’s like, too late [laughing].  
(Focus Group Participant Mark)

Both Mark and Dave shared highly intellectualized responses to the attacks they described. They both described their perceptions of why such attacks happen and what a useful response on their part would be.

People are going to say things no matter what. Why should I worry about the things others say? Why should I let it bother me, somebody that doesn't know what they're saying?… It's also just ignorance. And, availability. Each society has a scapegoat. Ours, right now, is the homosexuals. I'm going to take the most available insult that I can think of, quickly enough, and just use that toward that person. And right now I think calling somebody a fag, or queer, or lesbian, dyke, whatever you want to call it, it's quick, it's on the tip of your tongue, you want to use it, it's there, that's it. And, it offends the people it's meant to offend. (Focus Group Participant Dave)

I feel like, they're not really even worth my time or energy to like, say anything back. Because I don’t think anything I could say could affect them that much… But if I just go about my business then I don’t know, I just kind of feel like I’m better than that, than getting involved with somebody that’s like, that stupid that they would say something like that…. I think that people usually make those comments in situations where they outnumber me or where they’re like speeding away in a car because they’re like, kind of afraid, and they kind of know that they’re wrong, and it’s kind of cowardly. So I don’t think that they would actually, like, do anything [physical] about it. (Focus Group Participant Mark)

Apparent in these descriptions are the passive coping strategies discussed in Chapter 4. Neither man takes any specific action in response to an attack, but both view their passivity from a position of moral and intellectual superiority to their attackers.

In marked contrast to the grim response Gina imagined, everyone in this focus group laughed throughout the sharing of these experiences. It was my sense that our laughter was 1) demeaning the intellectual capacity of the attackers, 2) commiserating with the target (i.e., “I totally know what you mean”), and 3) protecting us from the negative feelings associated with the frequency and hostility of these incidents. By sharing this laughter with each other, we could all feel reassured that these incidents were not too threatening, and were not really a big deal.

Garnets, Herek, and Levy (1990) argued that denial impedes healing from an anti-gay verbal attack.
Like hate-motivated physical violence, anti-gay verbal assault challenges the victim's routine sense of security and invulnerability, making the world seem more malevolent and less predictable... Two of us (Garnet and Levy) have observed that victims often minimize the impact of a hate-motivated verbal attack and subsequently do not understand the reason for their feelings of fear or self hatred." (p. 373)

Using the defenses of joking, sarcasm, and laughing in descriptions of verbal attacks thus may have further reinforced the minimization that kept participants in denial about their level of risk, and also kept focus group participants from understanding their (reasonable) feelings of fear. This dynamic of denial and minimization may have been particularly strong because all but Suresh (including the interviewer) had been publicly out (and thus vulnerable to harassment) for many years. In contrast, Suresh had little previous experience with harassment (largely due to his ability and effort towards passing as heterosexual) or with hearing directly about harassment from other gay people. When Suresh reacted to the apparent hostility and seriousness of these attacks, the emotional climate rapidly and dramatically shifted.

I think if I experienced something like you guys did, I’d probably not be so cool as they were… I’d probably panic a bit. Just to make sure I don’t reveal myself too much, and you know, try to be not gay… I know that’s not like, the greatest thing to do, probably, but that’s sort of what my reaction would be, I guess… I’d probably tend to get a bit apprehensive if I did actually hear someone say that to me. (Focus Group Participant Suresh)

In response to Suresh’s apparent vulnerability, Mark and Dave quickly shifted the discussion to address the less threatening topic of SOI’s overheard between heterosexuals (i.e., cases in which none of us was the intended target).

[Dave:] That’s about all you hear, other than people going, talking to themselves within their own little group, people going faggot, to themselves... I don’t take that as an insult, that’s part of their own, talking to themselves, “This is gay.”… [Interviewer: How about you, Suresh?][Suresh:] When I’m in a group, I’m like, straight guys tend to crack gay-offensive jokes and stuff like that. And, well, basically, I’ve not come out to a lot of people because, so, I just tend to, you know, laugh along with them, like, as if I’m part of, enjoying that joke, too... I try to sort of mask my, well, what I’m actually feeling, my hurt feelings or whatever that is. [Dave:] Here it’s much different, people are more liberal. Even if they make a comment I don’t think that they’re gong to like, sit there and attack me because they just called their friend a fag. Gay has become the new word, it’s a new slang word for different things, “That’s so gay.” How can an inanimate object be a homosexual? It’s not the same as saying, you’re a faggot and pointing to a person. [Mark:] Yeah, but it bothers me... I guess, the people that I hang around with don’t use words like that. Because, I mean, they know it’s offensive... But, I don’t know, when I hear it from people, it’s just like, it takes me a while to register again, that they just said that, because I’m like, why would you say that?… I guess I just don’t want to like, cause any bad feelings, which is probably bad. Like, I should, if that’s what it takes, I should be like, “Don’t say that, at least not around me.” (Focus Group Participants Dave, Suresh, and Mark)

In these excerpts, Dave described rapid assessment of his vulnerability (on campus, he deemed it low), target (the insulter was targeting a straight person, not him), and intent (they were not really trying to insult gay people). The result was a rather practiced indifference. On the other hand, at the end of Mark’s excerpt he expressed an almost
wistful desire to stand up against SOI’s more directly and more quickly. He was neither as indifferent as Dave was, nor as willing as Suresh to disguise himself. The result appeared to be a less comfortable passivity.

Suresh’s portion of the excerpt again raises the important variable of degree of “outness.” Because of their obvious and known sexual orientations, Mark and Dave rarely heard SOI’s in the groups of people that were important to them. When they heard those terms, they were overheard, in passing, coming from strangers. These circumstances made Dave’s indifference relatively easy to maintain. Suresh, on the other hand, was exposed to these terms among his friends, in a context in which he wished to be comfortable, so SOI’s wounded him. He also heard them more frequently and in closer proximity than the other two participants. The variability of responses that this very small focus group provided suggests that any generalization about “gay men’s” responses to SOI’s would inevitably be oversimplified at best. Degree of openness regarding sexual orientation, length of time since coming out, degree of connection to a gay community, beliefs about masculinity, and level of assertiveness were all variables that had influenced the targets’ internal and external responses to both direct attacks and to overheard SOI’s. The women’s focus group participants provided further response options, as well. In contrast, heterosexual men’s responses to SOI’s and GRI’s were simpler.

Heterosexual men. Recall from Chapter 4 that targets’ responses were classified as positive, negative, or neutral. Most heterosexual men participants who were teased by their friends using SOI’s and/or GRI’s had positive responses. For example, in the Positive Response subsection of Chapter 4, Alex described using faggot to get a laugh and have more fun. Indeed, a large portion of participants laughed at SOI’s and GRI’s and responded in kind (symmetrically), or simply felt unfazed by them.

You can say, “You’re a fag,” and they’re just going to laugh or something. (19 year-old man, non-native English speaker, African, urban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 11 insults)

And we joke about [being gay] all the time, even we would joke like we are. But, we know we’re not. (Martin: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 35 insults)

The fag [is] not such much [insulting] to me because I’m not gay and I know like, everybody knows that I am not gay. So, it’s like, you are just saying that, so it doesn’t really bother me. (Nathan: 20 year-old man, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 51 insults)

As demonstrated earlier, SOI’s and GRI’s often served the specific function of coercing a man to more closely match peer expectations for his behavior. Thus, these insults generally demanded a face-saving response from the target. As with responses to other categories of teasing insults discussed in Chapter 4, a symmetrical teasing response demonstrated that the target could 1) control his emotions, 2) appropriately defend himself, 3) demonstrate
his heterosexual masculinity by derogating gay and/or unmasculine men, and 4) strengthen the friendship group by
laughing with them. If the target refused or was unable to respond symmetrically, he was sometimes harassed further
because he was not demonstrating appropriate loyalty to men or men’s values.

A few participants did provide examples of negative responses to SOI’s. For some, these terms were
offensive because the target’s masculinity was challenged.

I used to [call my little brother gay] and I seen it hurt him, and it was kind of like, “Why am I
hurting my little brother?” (Dante: 18 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual, no
religion, listed 12 insults)

[I]f it comes down to fights, they'll start calling them pussies, and fags, to try to make them feel
smaller so that if, maybe if they want a confrontation, they'll use those insults to try to make them,
“I'll prove you wrong, I'm not a pussy, I'm not a fag,” and it usually will escalate into a fight, from
my perspective. (Brian: 19 year-old man, white, rural, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)

Physically fighting in response to serious use of SOI’s was another option, but clearly carried greater risk,
particularly if the target’s manhood was further threatened by losing the fight.

For another small group of participants, the terms were offensive because of their political implications for
gay people. For example, Gerald was previously cited as being supportive of gay people and “weeding out” friends
based, in part, on their use of SOI’s. Another participant described similar sentiments.

I don’t like those words [SOI’s], so I don’t really use them, because I find them offensive to me as
well as any of my friends. (18 year-old woman, non-native English speaker, Latina, Puerto Rican,
suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 8 insults)

The social value of appearing non-prejudiced seemed to play little role in the responses of most
heterosexual men. Perhaps the context of the friendship group, where values are either known or presumed, made
this unnecessary. Alternatively, or possibly in combination, there was no need to demonstrate fairness because the
understood target was un-masculine men, not gay men specifically. There is no evidence in the present study that
any heterosexual participant felt concerned about being perceived as prejudiced against un-masculine heterosexual
men.

**Insults Directed Towards Women**

In contrast to the pervasive use of SOI’s and GRI’s towards men, there was little reported targeting of
women in the present study. Only seven insults in Table 5.1 are applicable to women (17%). This finding is
consistent with Thurlow (2001) who found 14% of his participants’ SOI’s specific to women, the most frequent
being lesbian (in the present study, the most frequent woman-specific SOI was *dyke*). In addition, Sutton (1995)
found no SOI’s in her study of “ugly names” for women. Nonetheless, a number of participants in the present study
did report SOI and GRI use towards women, and women focus group participants easily recalled multiple instances in which SOI’s had been directed towards them in verbal attacks.

**Insults directed towards lesbians and bisexual women.** Though fewer participants reported use of SOI’s and GRI’s towards women than towards men, those participants who did report them confirmed that the same rules apply. These participants agreed that it was inappropriate to direct SOI’s towards lesbians and bisexual women.

But, if I used it [lesbian] toward someone that is a lesbian, I think it would hurt them. Like I’ve never used it because I feel like it would bother them. (Lynn: 23 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 67 insults)

It seems to me that the rule is you don’t call someone that’s outside [the lesbian group], if you’re outside the group you don’t call them [a dyke] anyway. Know what I mean? (Laura: 26 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 19 insults)

However, several participants did admit to calling presumed lesbians SOI’s behind their backs (a phenomenon that was not discussed in reference to gay or bisexual men).

All these women pull up [to the firefighter training center], and they start getting out of their cars... All the guys I was in fire school with were, “Oh, look at that dyke, look at that dyke, blah, blah, blah...” And the instructor says... the word “clambumpers,” and I about fell down the steps I was laughing so hard... For the rest of the day we were using that word left and right, “Oh, clambumper!” It was silly. (Joel: 26 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Jewish, listed 46 insults)

We say dyke. Like, “Oh, she’s a dyke.” We don’t say it like, ewwww. You know?... But, it’s like, “Wow, she’s a dyke,” you know what I mean?... Like, dang, she’s not like us, know what I mean? (Lanelle: 21 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 23 insults)

There was an additional group of participants who used SOI’s to refer to lesbians, but it was not clear whether they understood that the terms they chose are generally seen as offensive.

It's kind of rare to find lesbos here because there's a lot of, you know... I mean a man is gay, and it's harder to tell that a girl is, you know, gay too. (Len: 20 year-old man, non-native English speaking, white, Lithuanian, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 6 insults)

Like, a gay woman is a dyke to me. Well, I don’t have any women that are gay as friends. But, I knew some, like acquaintances, maybe, or just classmates. (Shandra: 18 year-old woman, African-American, heterosexual, no religion, listed 15 insults)

I don’t really use lesbian or nothing like. I’ll say dyke or fag... Dyke is two women and fag is two men. (18 year-old woman, African-American, rural, heterosexual, no religion, listed 13 insults)

As with insults directed towards gay men, the lesbian and bisexual focus group participants divided SOI’s into three categories of use, each with its own rules and criteria for offensiveness: 1) LGB in-group use, 2) anti-gay verbal attacks, and 3) overheard SOI’s used between heterosexuals.
In-group use. The lesbian and bisexual focus group participants described their use of SOI’s as tools for empowerment and shorthand for sub-cultural stereotypes.

[Jen:] Not sure this matters, but when I say dyke, it's a whole different thing. [Liz:] Yeah, see, that's the whole the minority using the derogatory term to empower themselves kind of thing that we see everywhere with every group. [Jen:] Normally, I'll see like a cute little butch girl, and I'll be like, aww, look at that little dyke. [everyone laughing]. [Liz:] Yeah, like, Alix Olsen is the hottest dyke ever. You know, we mean it in a good way... And, I feel like it's every minority's right to do that. To reclaim whatever derogatory terms in whichever way they see fit... Because there are these terms that are used against us and we have the choice to re-claim them and use them however we want... Which is why I will call my friends dykes, and I will mean it with the utmost love. I will say things are fag-a-licious if I like them a lot, you know, because that's my prerogative to re-claim that word because I can have it, it's mine. (Focus Group Participants Jen: 23 year-old woman, white, suburban, bisexual, Episcopalian; and Liz: 21 year-old woman, white, urban, lesbian, Wiccan)

Unlike in the men’s focus group, none of the women’s group participants disagreed or felt uncomfortable with in-group usage of SOI’s. In addition, these terms did not seem to carry any “negative” stereotypes with them – despite reference to an unconventional gender typing (i.e., butch). This finding stands in contrast to the discomfort the men’s group participants expressed towards un-masculine men.

In an interesting exchange between Angie and Liz, the two discuss what it means when an LGB person uses an SOI in the same way as the general population.

[Angie:] Like, the other day, my roommate commented that something was gay, and I re-commented that, yeah, I agreed that it was gay. And, then they all turned around and looked at me like, “Wow, did that just come out of your mouth?” It was just like, “Wow, I didn't think you would say something like that.” [Liz:] Well, was it like a gay thing?... [Angie:] No, it was being used as something stupid, it's dumb. Nothing actually homosexual. [Liz:] See, and I don't know how to feel about that. When I hear LGBT persons using the word like gay, to mean stupid, it's kind of like. What should my reaction be to this? I don't like the way that they're using it, but you know, it's kind of like, that seems so self-defeating, and I'm like, you know that you're gay... are you like, saying that you're stupid?... But, people say it because it's what everybody says and they don't think about it. So, it's kind of like... [Angie:] It was like a re-comment after what they said, so I was just kind of, I wasn't really thinking about it.

Angie’s explanation was similar to the explanations of supportive participants who used SOI’s.

Verbal attacks. Liz reported that it was uncommon for her to have a heterosexual person direct an SOI towards her.

I think that women are usually a bit more behind the back with things that they're uncomfortable with. They would be a lot less likely to confront something like [sexual orientation] outright. Guys, who normally would confront something outright like that, generally, don't have a problem with feminine looking lesbians because they have this whole like, lesbian fantasy thing. They're like, lesbians are cool. (Focus Group Participant Liz)

Joanna agreed that these terms are uncommon among women.
I hear lesbo and dyke like in movies more…. I have heard girls say like, "He's a fag." We have used that name but not really lesbo or dyke. That's just not typical….Once in a while I've heard [my guy friends] say something about lesbo… but guys kind of like girls that are together, you know? And, I think that's a trend now so I don't think they use it as derogatory. (Joanna: 20 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 20 insults)

Nonetheless, several focus group participants described being called an SOI in a stigmatizing, mean way.

Somebody wrote, “Liz is a fag” on a table in my studio, and as far as I know it's still there. It followed me around for a whole year. Like, I was in a different studio and the table magically appeared. Saying, “Liz is a fag,” and I was like, okay. (Focus Group Participant Liz)

Because everybody knew I was bi. And, they were like, calling me a dyke, and a lesbian, and I was like, I told you, I'm bi. So, it was like, I actually got in trouble in my high school for standing on a table and screaming, I'm not a lesbian, I'm bisexual! (Focus Group Participant Diane: 20 year-old woman, white, suburban, bisexual, Christian)

The only time that I've ever dealt with someone like calling me a dyke was even before I realized I was gay… when I actually had, like, short hair. So, that's kind of interesting. I had a really good friend, and I think all of us had a really good friend [everyone laughing], and I was always hanging with her, that kind of thing. "You're lesbians." I was like, no, we're just best friends….

(Focus Group Participant Angie: 19 year-old woman, Asian-American of Chinese descent, suburban, lesbian, no religion)

Notably, several of these instances occurred in middle or high school rather than at college, and all were perpetrated by acquaintances of the target. Dave, from the men’s focus group, had witnessed several instances of stranger verbal attacks.

I work down[town] sometimes, and you'll hear people yelling across the street, like a short woman with short hair, a little stocky, they'll yell dyke out the window to her. Things like that. (Focus Group Participant Dave)

Stranger experiences, like the example provided by Dave, had not happened to the women’s group participants.

Indeed, these women reported that a more common form of harassment was much more distressing to them than the above instances.

More than threats, I get like, harassment. Like, “Oh, you're bi? Will you do me and my girlfriend?” …That's really what I get more than anything. And, that stuff scares me a little bit. (Focus Group Participant Diane)

And, [my male co-worker] was like, “So, you know, you're like, a lesbian.” And, I'm like, yes. [everyone laughs]…. And, that only kind of encouraged him to sexually proposition me more. Before, he was just flirting, and now he was like, “Oh.” So, then it totally turned into this kind of, “I've really got to tell you, that really does something for me.” (Focus Group Participant Liz)

Generally, these women agreed that their ability to pass as heterosexual (none of them met any physical stereotypes of a lesbian) was an important factor in their decreased vulnerability to frequent SOI’s, as well as their increased vulnerability to more sexualized harassment. This sexualization and objectification stands in direct contrast to the fear associated with gay and bisexual men’s sexuality.
[Liz:] I don't face a lot of animosity, generally, because I'm cute [everyone laughing], and you know, I'm not an intimidating presence, you know. [Angie:] You don't have a shaved head... [Liz:] Yeah, I don't have a shaved head, I'm not, I don't look very masculine so people are comfortable with me... [Jen:] I totally agree with that. [Liz:] I know that for girls who are androgynous or do not pass, they get a lot more, like, they're walking around campus and they're getting called dyke. I'm not, because in my experience, because I don't look like one, but I know that that happens to girls. I know that they get that walking down the street and just walking around. I just get propositioned. Which is disgusting, and makes me very nervous. (Focus Group Participants Liz, Angie, and Jen)

Combined with the reports of the men’s focus group, the degree to which one’s physical appearance matches stereotypes of LGB people is an important component of stranger verbal attacks on both women and men.

Finally, focus group women also overheard SOI's between heterosexuals, but their reports were that these terms were usually between heterosexual men, not heterosexual women.

Terms directed towards heterosexual women. In a major departure from SOI use towards heterosexual men, very few participants reported using or even having heard SOI’s directed towards heterosexual women.

You don’t really see it with girls. Like, I don’t ever call a girl a lesbian or anything. Not like, “Oh, you lesbian,” the way the guys just be like, “You’re so gay.” (Lisa: 19 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 14 insults)

[Interviewer: What about dyke? Do you ever hear that?] I don’t hear it… I can’t remember the last time I heard it, actually. (21 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 41 insults)

I’m comfortable with my sexuality. I don’t think I’d get offended if someone was like, “What’s up, dyke?”… I’ve heard those terms, but never towards me, but I probably wouldn’t even trip out like that cause I already know who I am and what I am, so it wouldn’t offend me at all. (19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 17 insults)

Mark, from the men’s focus group, did have one experience of hearing an SOI directed towards a heterosexual woman.

I haven't really heard [heterosexual women called a sexual orientation-related insult]. Except for one time, this girl I was talking to referred to Britney Spears as a dyke because that was just the most offensive thing she could come up with. Because she hates Britney Spears. And I was like, well, you suck. [everyone laughs]. But that's all. I haven't really heard people like trying to offend girls by calling them dykes or anything. (Focus Group Participant Mark)

In addition, there were a few participants who reported occasionally using an SOI towards a heterosexual woman.

If girls and girls are like, you know, they hold hands and stuff like that it's like, “Oh, you lesbian, stop that.”… We don't care. It's just fun I guess. That's the only reason we do it. (Hiro: 18 year-old man, non-native English speaking, Japanese, suburban, heterosexual, no religion, listed 21 insults)

We actually, my mom used to have spiky hair, like, back in the day, so we’d be like, you look like a dyke there, Mom. (Alex: 19 year-old man, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 25 insults)
Only one participant described a more generalized (i.e., non-sexual) use of an SOI towards a heterosexual woman.

   Just when, it’s not used that much necessarily when a girl is acting like gay really. But, it’s more
   or less used when they’re, they’re being a bitch. They’re, “Whatever, you dyke,” you know? It’s
   trying to insult them because they’re being mean, not because they’re acting like they like the
   same sex. (Brittany: 22 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 21
   insults)

Brittany’s description is similar to uses of *fag* and *gay* towards men. There were no other reports of these or other
uses of SOI’s towards heterosexual women.

*Attitudes towards lesbians and bisexual women.* The attitude-related statements and percentages presented
in the Attitudes Towards Gay and Bisexual Men section will not be repeated here. Participants generally referenced
“gay people” in their attitude statements, and did not specifically refer to separate attitudes towards lesbian or
bisexual women.

Supportive participants. Supportive participants often stated their support by way of discussing why they
did not use SOI’s, and these statements generally referred to the terms *gay* and *fag*. No participants specifically
stated support for lesbian or bisexual women in particular. However, two women who were clearly supportive did
address a fear of sexual advance from a woman.

   As long as you're not going to come up to me and try nothing like that, we can be best friends, you
   know what I mean? (Melina: 21 year-old woman, African-American, urban, heterosexual,
   A.M.E., listed 13 insults)

   I hang out with [my lesbian friend] sometimes separate from my friends… I mean… like she's a
   lesbian, but she's not like, you know if I took her out with my friends she wouldn't start hitting on
   my girlfriends, but I just don't know how comfortable they'd [heterosexual friends] be. (Stephanie:
   21 year-old woman, white, urban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 10 insults)

No supportive men expressed fear of a sexual advance from a gay or bisexual man, so this is a gender-related
difference among supportive participants. Additionally, Stephanie’s excerpt demonstrates her sense that all of her
friends need to be protected from discomfort – she is neither willing to give up her lesbian friend, nor to make her
heterosexual friends uncomfortable, so she keeps these friendships separate.

Ambivalent participants. One man in the ambivalent category specifically referred to a woman cousin in his
description of his attitude

   I mean, I’ve got a gay family member, so I’m like. If she wants to do that, that’s her, you know
   what I’m saying? That ain’t me. I’m not gay because she’s gay, but I mean, that’s just rude to call
   somebody a fag, you know what I’m saying?… If they want to be a fag, um, be gay, let them be
   gay. It’s not hurting you. (Marcus: 18 year-old man, African-American, urban, heterosexual,
   Baptist, listed 17 insults)
In addition, two ambivalent women specifically referenced a fear of sexual advance.

I'm not judgmental. I don't think anything less. I think whatever makes anybody happy, go ahead and do it. I do feel a little bit uncomfortable. Just because I feel like, don't hit on me, please. I wouldn't know how to handle the situation. Again, fear of the unknown. But, I really don't have a problem with them. (Katie: 18 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 63 insults)

Like if a girl tries to brush up on you, you think she's a dyke or gay or something. (Vanessa: 19 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Baptist, listed 22 insults)

Uncomfortable and disapproving participants. Only one uncomfortable participant specifically referred to lesbians in her interview.

Dyke, that's just an ugly word, I don't want to use that because that's just associated with women in jail. None of my friends have been in jail, so I don't call them [dyke]. (20 year-old woman, African-American, suburban, heterosexual, Christian, listed 13 insults)

All other expressions of discomfort either specifically referenced men or generically discussed moral or Biblical rules regarding homosexuality.

**Target responses.** Lesbian and bisexual women. The participants in the women’s focus group had some coping and defense mechanisms in response to direct verbal attacks in common with the gay men’s focus group. In particular, indifference and a sense of superiority were common themes.

[Regarding being called a lesbian by another student:] I think it was more like, you’re just stupid. It didn’t really make me afraid. I could care less what they think. As far as I was concerned, I could take the boys. [everyone laughing] (Focus Group Participant Angie)

[In regard to the graffiti incident:] I actually fixed it, after I first saw it. I put a piece of masking tape over it, then put a rainbow sticker over it and wrote pride on it, so I tried to fix it up a little bit. I don’t know who wrote it. But, somebody took the tape and sticker off of it, so it went back to saying [Liz is a fag]. Which, I mean I can’t really take seriously. I just thought it was kind of funny. I was kind of like, I can’t believe somebody had the balls to do that, like, I hadn’t dealt with that… The fact that something actually, like, came up kind of surprised me. I took pictures [everyone laughing]. It was funny to me because I didn’t feel threatened by it. I didn’t feel like I was under any danger from it, it was just somebody being obviously very stupid. (Focus Group Participant Liz)

Though the women demonstrated similar attitudes to the men’s focus group participants, Liz’s excerpt highlights one major difference between the groups, which is that the women described multiple examples of taking direct action in response to pejorative use of sexual orientation-related terms.

When people say something's gay, I like to correct that. That's my favorite thing to correct. I'll be like, “Not really, but I am.” Or something like that… Like if they say something like, “That shirt is so gay,” I'll be like, “Really, that shirt is attracted to shirts of the same gender?” [everybody laughing]… Something kind of, to the point of, what gay actually means. You're not using it in that context, so why are you using that word as opposed to a different word?… It irritates me, even though I know people don't mean to be offensive when they say these things. I guess, I'm just in the mindset of like, that's just a not proactive thing to be saying. I mean, these are… people I
know, know I'm gay, don't care, think gay people are cool, don't have any problems with anything, but they'll be like, “Man, that's so gay.” And, it's just like, “Really?” And then they go, “Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that. I just meant stupid, I didn't mean it like that.” (Focus Group Participant Liz)

My friend [name] who is absolutely flaming, like, you can't get near him without feeling the heat. So, we'll go shopping with him, and we'll be like, “[name] come here! You'll love this, it's so gay.” So, using it in a positive way. (Focus Group Participant Diane)

It's happened a number of times where it'll be like a group of guys and a butch girl will walk by, and they'll be like, “Dyke.” And I'll be like, once or twice, “Yeah, she's pretty hot, I'd fuck her.” You know, just to see the looks on their faces, it's just priceless, just priceless. And, you know, there's no fear there, I'm always comfortable here. (Focus Group Participant Jen)

Note that these instances of challenging action are in response to SOI’s that are not woman-specific, which may lend a greater sense of safety in making a challenge. These women are not correcting statements about their own gender identifications. In addition, Jen’s sense of safety from sexual orientation-related attacks is also linked to the shock value of someone that looks like her (i.e., heterosexual appearing) making such unexpected statements. All of the participants agreed that their appearance was vital. However, they also agreed that their relative safety from anti-LGB attacks did not translate into a general feeling of safety.

[Angie:] Yeah, because for the most part, I don’t think people usually presume that I’m gay. I don’t wear rainbow everything around, so the threat of gay violence doesn’t really touch me. I fear the threat of being a woman or of being Asian more than I fear the threat of being gay. [Diane:] Down here, especially. I don’t fear at all. [Liz:] If I'm on campus at night by myself, that's scary, and it's not because I'm a lesbian, it's because I'm a woman…. I'm afraid of men, and, not all of them, but you know, in general, between the ages of, oh, say, 15 and 60. [everyone laughing]. Because after 60, I think I could take them. Below 15 I'm pretty sure I could take them. But between the ages of 15 and 60 I find men generally intimidating, because I doubt my ability to take them in a fight, and men are crazy. Well, not all men are actually crazy, but there's so much violence against women and you hear so much about rapes on college campuses, that scares me. It has nothing to do with my sexuality, it's just being a woman. [Interviewer: Everyone is nodding, do you all agree?] [All:] Yeah (definitely, totally, yep). (Focus Group Participants Liz, Jen, Angie, Diane).

However, it quickly became clear that the sense of safety from anti-gay violence was dependent on maintaining a heterosexual façade. Of the participants, only Liz publicly held hands with her girlfriend. Diane’s earlier statements about a sense of safety on campus were clarified.

Honestly, when I've had girlfriends, no matter where I was, I've always been like, I can walk on the other side of the sidewalk from you, and we'll just, yeah, then when we get home, we can cuddle. (Focus Group Participant Diane)

Finally, despite their earlier reports on action against pejorative use of SOI’s, participants generally agreed that overheard SOI’s were not terribly threatening. Liz described her intellectual response to overheard SOI’s (an excerpt that shows striking similarity to Dave’s excerpt on the same topic).
The environments that I'm in on campus feel fairly safe to me, as far as, I'm comfortable saying something. It's just irritating when people say it, and not threatening. Because it's usually, people are saying it [SOI's] in a non-threatening way. They're not angry when they say it, they're blaise and loud. Like, man, this is so gay. And, that's how people say it. Dude, you're such a fag, like, whatever. It's not, it doesn't sound threatening, they're not angry, they're not in a volatile state, so you can just be like, man, I can't believe people are like, why did this have to catch on? (Focus Group Participant Liz)

Heterosexual women. Very few women interview participants had ever been called an SOI. Most reported that it would be odd, but not particularly offensive to them. However, two women reported that they would be offended if someone did use an SOI towards them.

[Interviewer: If somebody called you a dyke and they were joking around, would that be too far?] Yeah, it would. Because as of now, it wouldn't be true. And, I would feel like, wait, don't call me that. I'm not one. (Shandra: 18 year-old woman, African-American, heterosexual, no religion, listed 15 insults)

[Interviewer: Tell me why it would be so insulting to hear the word dyke.] Because it's just, like, I don't know, it would just be insulting, like if you know you're not, and people are, the same way it would be insulting to hear you're fat or you're ugly. (21 year-old woman, white, suburban, heterosexual, Catholic, listed 17 insults)

It is striking that both women objected to being inaccurately identified as lesbians. Neither considered the idea of alternate connotations to SOI’s (such as inappropriate gender role, being irritating, or lack of allegiance to a friendship group), suggesting that woman-specific SOI’s may be narrower, more precisely (albeit offensively) used terms.

Discussion

Overall, interview participants neither wanted to seem prejudiced, nor did they want to hurt anyone’s feelings. But, many lacked the knowledge that they needed to be able to communicate acceptance of LGB people. For example, many participants would have benefited from specific information on proper or preferred terms (sometimes I shared this information at the end of the interview), or mistakes that heterosexual people make when trying to seem unprejudiced. Conley, Calhoun, Evett, and Devine (2001) conducted a study with LGB people on the most common mistakes made by well-meaning heterosexual people, and these “mistakes” were prevalent throughout participant interviews in the present study. In particular, participants used subtle prejudicial language, pointed out that they were not prejudiced, stated that they knew one or more gay people (as evidence of their lack of prejudice), and emphasized that their gay friends did not match gay stereotypes. Despite these mistakes, nearly one-third (28%) of participants expressed a gay-affirmative stance, and nearly one-third (29%) refrained from SOI use for various reasons.
For those who did use SOI’s, the majority refrained from using them towards known LGB people, which was significant to the interpretation and experience of these terms for most focus group participants. While the focus group participants reported frequently overhearing these terms, those who were publicly out and fairly comfortable with their sexual orientations reported they were unfazed and unthreatened by the terms. In other words, focus group participants generally understood the multiple layers of meaning intended when heterosexuals used SOI’s with each other, and felt that the terms were, for the most part, not meant to convey a specifically anti-LGB ill will. Despite this ability to interpret and intellectualize SOI use, most focus group participants were still bothered by pejorative SOI use, and the women frequently took direct action against this type of use.

Previous theoretical literature includes multiple assertions that pejorative SOI use, even when not directed towards LGB people, does great damage to the identity of LGB people (e.g., Armstrong, 1997; Fontaine, 1997; Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 1990; Smith, 1998; Thurlow, 2001). This discrepancy may be due to a number of factors. First, many of the previous articles addressed high school age students or younger. By college, students may have developed greater coping mechanisms (such as the intellectualization and sense of superiority demonstrated by focus group participants), and may also have much greater control over their environments and level of exposure to such terms. For example, in high school, students generally have assigned classes, lockers, and buses alongside often unsupportive or oblivious administrations. In college, students can select their own courses and majors, may be able to choose roommates or move out of dorms, and often have, if not a supportive administration, at least some supportive group or organization on campus.

Another potential difference is the degree of openness regarding sexual orientation. In high school, many students are not yet out, and thus, like Suresh, may be exposed to greater SOI use among their friends. By college, more LGB students choose not to hide, so friends and acquaintances may try to censor their words (as reported by heterosexual interview participants). They may also have developed a support network of other LGB people to help them cope with such experiences.

Supportive participants were less likely to casually use SOI’s, and there is some evidence to suggest that men, at least, become less concerned with the sexual orientations and behaviors of their friends as they age (Plummer, 1999). Combined with the Chapter 4 trend towards using fewer teasing insults as participants aged, LGB people are likely to be exposed to fewer instances of SOI’s through their lifespan. However, participants provided no evidence that the tenets of masculinity might decrease in significance over time. Indeed, the primary function of
SOI’s and GRI’s was to coerce and maintain loyalties and behavior. These standards and values appeared to be reinforced even in groups of men for whom homosexuality was accepted (e.g., interview participants Joel and Gerald, and all men’s focus group participants). Sexual orientation is certainly linked to masculinity in the minds of heterosexual participants, but even when it was separated from masculinity by gay-affirmative participants, the values of masculinity remained. Indeed, the deviance from masculine standards could be fairly minor and still earn a strong response.

The (rare) use of SOI’s towards heterosexual women showed no evidence of such a gendered component. However, women who greatly deviated from feminine standards were also subject to malicious SOI use, particularly from strangers. Less stereotypical, feminine lesbians were not free from harassment. It appears that SOI-based harassment in particular may occur less frequently when compared to gay and bisexual men, but sexualized harassment may occur much more frequently.

It is interesting that equal numbers of heterosexual women and men addressed fear of a sexual advance from a same-sex LGB person. The previous literature has many examples of this fear in heterosexual men, but does not address the same concern in heterosexual women. The basis for concern appears to be quite distinct between the sexes. For heterosexual men, discomfort with gay and bisexual men was often stated in terms of their inappropriate gender role adherence (e.g., “they had to prove 10 times more than a woman that they were like women” – Tyler). This characterization is inaccurate, however, as making a sexual advance would actually be gender appropriate for men. Thus, the fear of a sexual advance from a man is based more on fear of being treated like a woman than being approached by an un-masculine person. Additional insult seems to come from the idea that the man making the advance might think the target is unmanly enough to say “yes” to such an advance. For women, on the other hand, a sexual advance from a woman would mean being treated by a woman the same way as by a man. Thus, the discomfort is in the change in gender role behavior by the approaching woman, rather than in a change in the treatment of the target.
The Social Rules of Sexual Orientation-Related Insult Use

*Towards LGB people.* The vast majority of heterosexual participants felt that serious SOI use towards LGB people would be a gross violation of social rules. Specifically, these terms would target a core aspect of an LGB person’s identity, and would violate rules of symmetry. Indeed, there were no SOI’s for heterosexuals listed or discussed that would carry the same weight (and, perhaps, history) as would the hostile use of *fag, dyke,* or *queer.*

Despite the history of the term *straight* (co-opted by lesbians and gay men to pejoratively refer to heterosexuals; Hughes, 1991), the term has lost most of its pejorative connotations. As Valentine (1998) argued, “Not all have equal power to make definitions and make them stick” (p. 3.2). Indeed, one symmetry challenge is that heterosexuality is associated with morality in political discourse (and homosexuality with immorality), thus rendering pejorative associations to heterosexuality largely nonsensical to those who concur with the moral dichotomy.

The verbal attacks experienced by LGB participants indicate that some heterosexuals have broken the social rules prohibiting serious SOI use. Nearly all of the described verbal attacks occurred when the attacker had low accountability (e.g., the attacker was driving by, or wrote graffiti anonymously), making the social rule violation less risky for the attacker. Indeed, several interview participants admitted to using racist and sexist insults in low accountability situations. The focus group participants’ experiences confirm that some people use similar opportunities to use SOI’s. In addition, the benefit to attackers (e.g., Franklin’s [2000] finding of SOI use to reduce boredom or to fit in with peers) may outweigh the risks of social rule violation.

Teasing SOI use in cross-sexual orientation relationships was generally seen as inappropriate for the same reasons as serious SOI use. In the case of teasing, however, there are a few SOI’s for heterosexuals that might provide the opportunity for symmetry (e.g., *breeder, normal*). Nonetheless, no participant described mutual teasing SOI use in a cross-sexual orientation friendship. Indeed, cross-sexual orientation relationships were often more formal (expressed as less closeness than with other friends) than friendships among heterosexuals, creating an additional barrier to teasing insults. There were several participants who reported having close LGB friends, but some of them reported that they kept these friends separate from their friendship groups to avoid discomfort for all.
parties. As insult games were more common in groups of friends than in duos, these separated friendships would be less likely to involve many teasing insults.

Heterosexual ignorance of non-pejorative sexual orientation-related terms may create an additional barrier to teasing insults in cross-sexual orientation friendships. Interview participants reported that they could use taboo and offensive terms because their friends knew their real beliefs and values (e.g., Planalp & Garvin-Doxas, 1994). Heterosexual participants who could not identify non-offensive sexual orientation-related terms would not have been able to convey LGB-affirmative values to LGB friends. In addition, LGB people have described, “ignoring gay issues” (Conley, Calhoun, Evett, & Devine, 2001, p. 25) as an indication of heterosexuals’ prejudice. Thus, heterosexual ignorance of acceptable terms and desire to avoid offending LGB people may be interpreted by LGB people as an expression of prejudice. Knowledge of at least neutral sexual orientation-related language would certainly not eliminate barriers to friendship, but may be a necessary precursor to establishing a friendship at all.

Towards heterosexuals. When SOI’s were used towards heterosexual friends in a teasing tone, the social rules were the same as those for other teasing insults between friends. Insults, in general, were a safe way for men with traditional conceptions of masculinity to express individuality and affection for each other, while appearing “cool” and conforming to group norms. Indeed, SOI’s may be especially appealing among all insult possibilities for this group of men, as SOI’s assert heterosexuality simultaneously with affection. Men who did not use SOI’s fell into two major categories: men who had realized that they could not identify LGB people by sight and therefore erred on the side of caution by refraining from SOI use altogether, and men who had alternate conceptions of masculinity. Indeed, for two of these men, the term masculinity itself raised stereotypes of traditional values, beliefs, and behaviors that were incongruent with their identities. In addition, men with LGB-affirmative attitudes seemed either to be offended by others’ negative use of SOI’s, or took SOI’s very lightly because they had few negative associations to LGB status.

Notably, women rarely described teasing use of SOI’s towards each other. Most heterosexual women who imagined hypothetically being targeted with an SOI seemed to take the terms literally (i.e., they did not access negative connotative extensions of the terms), and therefore found them bizarre and non-offensive.

Serious SOI use towards heterosexuals was described only cursorily by participants. However, SOI’s were referred to by some as “fighting words” – words that are said during a fight or could be used to provoke a physical
fight. Again, the degree of adherence to traditional masculine ideology was closely related to the degree to which an SOI was offensive to the target.

**The Meaning of Sexual Orientation-Related Insults**

By far, the most common use of SOI’s was among heterosexual men. Though none of three major dictionaries (American Heritage, Webster’s, WordNet) has defined *gay* or *fag* in use towards heterosexual men, the definition of *bitch* listed in Chapter 3 (“a man considered to be weak or contemptible” [American Heritage Dictionary, 2000]) is a close match to the pejorative definitions given by participants in the present study. Additional components of SOI meanings were, “a man who is insufficiently masculine,” “a man who shows too much emotion,” “a man who does not comply with group expectations,” or “a man who behaves in a stereotypically homosexual way.” For white men and women, an additional meaning was, “any person, place, or thing that is undesirable, unacceptable, out-of-fashion, or boring.”

Despite the stated absence of negative intent towards LGB people among the majority of participants, the meanings that heterosexuals ascribed to their SOI use devalued and stigmatized LGB people by linking SOI’s with pejorative connotations. Indeed, the negative connotations of SOI’s were so well established that several participants did not recognize any positive connotations of self-chosen LGB-related terms, and felt LGB people would or should be offended by the terms *gay* and *lesbian*. The fact that *gay*, *lesbian*, and *homosexual* appeared on participants’ insult lists at all does not bode well for the terms’ futures as positive self-labels. On the other hand, the spirited attempts of focus group participants (especially the women) to use SOI’s positively (e.g., “fag-a-licious” and “not cool enough to be gay”) suggest that many LGB youth will not quietly accept negative evaluation of their identities.

The meaning and weight of SOI’s (both in use towards heterosexual and LGB participants) were shaped by the value participants placed on adherence to traditional gender roles. Behaving in a sufficiently masculine way seemed more central to the majority of men’s identities than did femininity for most of the women participants. Indeed, this ideology of traditional masculinity was so powerful that gay men in the present study described regulation of and commentary on the insufficient gender role adherence of their gay peers. As Goffman observed, the stigmatized individual exhibits a tendency to stratify his “own” according to the degree to which their stigma is apparent and obtrusive… [T]he stigmatized individual may exhibit identity ambivalence when he obtains a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way… The sight may repel him, since after all he supports the norms of the wider society, but his social and psychological identification with these offenders holds him to what repels him, transforming
repulsion into shame, and then transforming ashamedness itself into something of which he is ashamed. (Goffman, 1963, p. 107-108)

It is important to note that, though SOI’s carried negative connotations for most heterosexual participants, the degree to which SOI’s were deeply offensive was mediated by the degree of adherence to traditional concepts of masculinity. For those who used SOI’s but were not strongly invested in masculine ideals, SOI’s were amusing, and not threatening; SOI’s connoted some gender nonconformity or unexpected behavior, but these participants were not strongly invested in being perceived as conforming or as traditionally masculine.

The standards of traditional femininity did not appear to be as closely tied to SOI’s for the majority of the women participants. The women focus group participants did discuss gender non-conforming women, but they did so with a tone of affection and attraction, rather than stigmatization. Indeed, women in the present study had little emotional reaction to the idea of gender role violations, particularly in women (though a few women did have traditional gender role standards, and wished other women would adhere more closely to tradition).

**Heterosexuals’ Intents Compared to LGB Peoples’ Experiences of SOI Use**

*Anti-LGB verbal attacks.* No participants in the present study admitted to using SOI’s in verbal attacks against LGB people, and the intent of this form of SOI use cannot be extrapolated from the verbal assaults experienced by LGB participants. However, Franklin (2000) studied perpetrators of “anti-gay acts” (including insults, threats, and physical assaults) and identified six motivating factors for attack: 1) thrill-seeking, 2) anti-LGB ideology, 3) peer dynamics, 4) enforcement of gender norms, 5) self-defense against a perceived LGB aggression (such as believing an LGB person was making a sexual advance), and 6) social powerlessness (i.e., aggressing to remove power from those who do not deserve it). Thus, the intent of verbal abuse towards LGB people may vary significantly from instance to instance. Indeed, Franklin’s data suggest that an anti-LGB act may occur with no particular consideration (negative or otherwise) for the potential consequences to the LGB target.

The present study did explore LGB participants’ responses to verbal attack. Most LGB participants minimized and intellectualized their experiences of verbal attack, though they simultaneously modified their behavior to prevent further attacks. For example, several of the women reported that, in public, they did not stand too close to women they were dating, even on the campus on which they “don’t feel fear at all” (Diane). Women and men reported avoiding LGB-friendly establishments at particular times and in particular locations, and most made decisions to not wear any symbol of “pride” on their clothing or backpacks. Despite the negative impact of verbal attacks, several participants also demonstrated resilience, assertiveness, and a sense of humor. Others were
more ambivalent in their responses to attack, and struggled to come to a response and coping style that more closely matched their ideals. The one participant who was closeted in most environments had no experience of a direct, anti-gay verbal attack. However, he reported that he would likely be afraid and upset in response to such an attack (i.e., he did not believe he would be able to minimize and intellectualize the experience), and that he would likely monitor his behavior to ensure that he more effectively hid his sexual orientation in the future.

SOI’s directed towards heterosexuals. The vast majority of heterosexual participants who used SOI’s reported that they intended no malice toward LGB people. Indeed, only a handful expressed predominantly negative attitudes towards LGB people. All LGB participants, regardless of their degree of openness, understood that heterosexuals did not intend harm to LGB people by their use of SOI’s towards each other. The impact of heterosexual SOI use on LGB participants, however, was not entirely tempered by this intellectual grasp on intent. All LGB participants had developed coping and defense mechanisms for this category of SOI use, from learning how to pass as heterosexual in particular situations to denigrating the intellects of heterosexuals who used SOI’s towards each other.

Though only one LGB participant in the present study was closeted in most situations, his experiences highlight a significant gap between heterosexual intent and LGB experience. In the case of Suresh, his friends intended to do no harm to LGB people by using SOI’s only within their close group of friends, whom they presumed to be heterosexual. Their heterosexist assumptions (combined with Suresh’s deliberate discretion) resulted in Suresh’s hurt feelings, sense of isolation, and stronger determination to disguise himself from his friends. Though the weight of the harm in this situation is mostly borne by Suresh, his friends may also suffer from the lost opportunity for a more genuine, relaxed, and satisfying relationship (though they may be unaware of this loss). This scenario is likely replicated countless times in high schools (and, as youth come out at increasingly younger ages, middle schools), as LGB youth begin the process of sexual orientation awareness. As an additional stress, these youth are unlikely to have yet developed the sophisticated coping mechanisms and support systems that the LGB college students in this study had developed over years of being out to themselves. Closeted youth and youth in early stages of coming out processes are the groups that appear most vulnerable to psychological and relational harm, regardless of the lack of negative intent among heterosexual users of SOI’s.
Limitations

The interview and insult list participants in this study were not a random sample of students at this University. The focus group participants were a very small group of students who by no means represented LGB students at the University. Rather than attempting to achieve representativeness, this study aimed for saturation, that is, interviews until the participants provided little new data. That goal was achieved, but generalization from their data to all college students would be inappropriate.

It is clear that insult lists are poor indicators of the insults college students use, and even worse indicators of the propensity of participants to use them. Thus, Thurlow’s (2001) assertion that “it is not unreasonable to expect that the incidence of their [insult] reporting reflects the incidence of their use” (p. 32) is not supported in this study. Many participants who used SOI’s neglected to list them, and many participants who listed SOI’s did not use them. The interview portion of the study shed light on why this might be the case. Several participants reported thinking about different social categories of people (e.g., racial groupings, sexual orientation groupings, etc.) and trying to list insults for each. Others listed insults they heard frequently and then added similar insults for balance (for example, the participant who listed frequently used SOI’s for men, then added SOI’s for women to be “fair”). Other participants did not list any offensive or swear words (even though they used them) because I was a “teacher,” despite my verbal instruction to not censor their words.

Another complication is that the number of available terms within each insult category is dramatically different, making extrapolations about frequency inappropriate. To illustrate, the SOI category included 18 unique terms, whereas the Race/Ethnicity category included 75 unique terms (notably, this included 17 terms for white people). Race/Ethnicity insults were used 12 times in field data, whereas fag was used 21 times in field data (total SOI use in field data collection was 46 times). SOI’s appeared at more than twice the rate in the field data than on insult lists. Though the field data collection was of questionable representativeness, it does suggest that the insult lists provided an underestimate of SOI frequency; in contrast, the lists suggest more propensity to use Race/Ethnicity insults than is supported by the fieldwork.

Finally, the listing format was severely limited by the lack of information on tone (Thurlow’s study did not have this limitation as his instructions requested negative insults only) and target. Knowing that SOI’s were used in a serious tone about as often as a teasing tone, and almost always towards presumed heterosexual targets provides more useful information for planning interventions than the insult lists alone could provide.
The field data also had limitations. For example, Goffman’s (1959) reports of social distance surrounding friendship groups held true, as it was difficult for research assistants to comfortably get close enough to groups to overhear their insults. Thus, participants were often accurate in their perception that SOI use within their friendship group was not audible to outsiders. Nonetheless, several field data collection experiences suggested that students are not always accurate in their judgments of who is an in-group member.

Despite their limitations, the insult lists and field data did provide preliminary data that merits further research. Refined insult listing and field research could replicate and explore the greater consistency within white men’s lists than within the other sex-race groups, the finding that African-American women rated SOI’s worst at a rate lower than other sex-race groups, and the finding that women listed the same number of insults as men but were heard using them significantly less than men in the field and media data.

**Interventions to Decrease SOI Use**

The present study provides evidence that reducing teasing and serious SOI use would have a positive impact on the lives of both closeted and visible LGB people. In addition, this study provides evidence that the majority of heterosexuals who use SOI’s do not wish to offend LGB people. The model of insult use presented here, combined with the meaning and intent of SOI use, suggests multiple opportunities for intervention. Obviously, many of the suggestions below are already being implemented; the present study simply provides additional research-based support for these ongoing activities.

- Educate students on non-offensive terms for LGB people.
- Educate students on the fallibility and inaccuracy of stereotypes. Even participants who disapproved of homosexuality felt it was uncouth to use SOI’s in the presence of LGB people; participants who believed they could not reliably identify LGB people by sight or acquaintance were more cautious regarding SOI use, or abstained altogether.
- Educate students on social rules of insult use and games, then support the drive for creativity by having students generate funnier and less offensive responses to SOI’s. Harman’s (1985) work on slang explores how new words can be introduced and adopted in social groups. A related intervention might be to have students generate SOI’s for heterosexuality, which may heighten awareness of the current lack of symmetry in SOI’s.
• Work to improve attitudes towards LGB people. Overall, participants with more positive attitudes towards LGB people were less likely to use SOI’s. Participants with positive attitudes who did use SOI’s seemed to use them in a less pejorative way than more ambivalent participants. Participants with positive LGB contacts also demonstrated greater awareness of the emotional impact SOI’s could have. The fear of sexual advance should be directly addressed as part of this work.

• Educate students on the traditional ideologies of masculinity, and ask them to consider how such ideologies practically affect their choices, experiences, and behavior.

Suggestions for Future Research

Though the insult listing procedure in the present study had significant limitations, it was also an inexpensive data collection strategy that could be further exploited with useful results. Some of the limitations might be addressed with a multi-step process in which participants list the insults they know, the insults they use, the insults their friends use, and the tone in which all of them are used. In addition, presenting participants with a master list of insults, with each participant judging the same list of possibilities, would produce significantly more meaningful results regarding the level of taboo associated with specific insults. Relative frequency of insults could also be assessed by asking participants to rank an insult list by frequency of hearing and frequency of use.

In addition, a number of participants reported that they used more insults than they could recall for their insult lists, and wished they could take the list when they went out with their friends, to complete as they were talking. A rich data set could result from having participants collect insults from their friendship groups in action, perhaps with the addition of researcher observation of select friendship groups to get further data on dynamics and how the insults are used. It would fill an important gap in our knowledge to collect data in this way from women’s and men’s friendship groups, as well as mixed-race and single-race friendship groups, thus clarifying the dynamics of gender and race ideologies in each. In addition, it would be valuable to invite friendship groups that use SOI’s to discuss their attitudes regarding LGB people. Viewing this dynamic could provide information on the way SOI use is supported, maintained, or rejected in friendship groups (similar to Gough’s [2002] focus group study, but with friendship groups).

Finally, traditional masculine ideology might be further elaborated by exploring use of insults that have traditionally been used towards women (such as bitch, whore, slut) as they were used towards men. In addition, the gender divide in insult games (i.e., the fact that men and women generally did not insult each other), seemed related
to symmetry rules. There are few words listed in Chapter 3 that would have the same impact on women and men. Women’s lack of a “sense of humor” for being insulted is more likely that they have few available appropriate (symmetrical) responses. This topic merits further exploration.
Tables and Figures
Table 2.1

**Interview Guide**

Note that this is a list of possible questions, and that not all questions were asked in every interview.

- General questions regarding family structure, major, living situation, and social networks.
- What about with your current friends, do you ever use insults with each other when you are just joking? What insults do you use most often? Are there any insults that are out of bounds that you wouldn’t use? Have you ever gotten mad about an insult a friend used joking?
- What insults do you use when you’re angry or offended?
- What insults do you use when you are talking about someone who is not present?
- Are there any insults that you used to use, but don’t use any more? Are there insults you have just recently started using? Do you have any ideas about what prompted the start/stop of using that insult? Are there circumstances that raised one insult over another?
- Based on the insult list, ask about how they use insults from various categories and ask about any categories that do not appear on their list. For instance, “I see you have faggot, queer, etc. here. When do you use those? Some people report using fag or gay to mean something else when they’re talking to friends, and then something else when they are trying to insult someone. How do you use those words? How do your friends?” or “I see you have fag, gay, but I don’t see anything for women. Do you use any words like that for women?”
- If the participant does not raise any anti-LGB language in the course of these questions, then state, “A lot of people report using words like queer, faggot, fag, punk, or dyke – those haven’t come up yet in what we’ve talked about. Have you or your friends used any of those?” Then ask same questions as above about those specific insults. If the person reports that they have not used any of those, ask something like, “Since use of those insults is so common, I’m wondering why you haven’t used those insults” and explore what factors are most salient in preventing their use, including religious affiliation or beliefs.
- For any group related insults, “When you use [insult], do you really believe the person is gay/lesbian/bi or Jewish or etc.? Do you know anyone who is gay/lesbian/bi or African-American or etc.? What makes you
choose that insult instead of another like [insult]? What do you think about lesbian/gay/bi people or African-American or Jewish or etc.? What do your friends think about lesbian/gay/bi or [group] people? ”

- Can you think of the last time you were really angry? Can you tell me a little bit about the situation? Did you use any insults? What insults did you use?

- Can you think of anything else related to insults that you think I should have asked about?
Table 2.2

**Insult Categories and Prototypical Examples**

- Sexual Orientation-Related Insults: queer, gay, lesbo
- Race / Ethnicity-Related Insults: nigger, cracker, A-rab
- Insults for Women: slut, whore, bitch
- Insults for Men: dick, prick, bastard
- Scatological Insults: shit, asswipe, asshole
- Social-Personality Insults: prissy, stuck up, jerk
- Physicality Insults: fat, ugly, bald
- Class / Economic Status (Alone) Insults: poor, trashy, broke
- Insults that Combine Race and Class: ghetto, white trash, redneck, hoodlum
- Intelligence / Lack Thereof Insults: stupid, moron, nerd
- Drug-Related Insults: drunk, crackhead, druggie
- Inappropriate Gender Role Adherence Insults: sissy, tomboy, pussy
- Miscellaneous Insults
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Movie Title</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Movie Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Spider Man</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>The Santa Clause 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Lord Of The Rings: The Two Towers</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Minority Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Star Wars: Episode II – Attack Of The Clones</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>The Ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Harry Potter And The Chamber Of Secrets</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sweet Home Alabama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Mr. Deeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Signs</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>The Bourne Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Austin Powers In Goldmember</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>The Sum Of All Fears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Men In Black II</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8 Mile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ice Age</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Road To Perdition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Catch Me If You Can</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Panic Room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Maid In Manhattan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Die Another Day</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Two Weeks Notice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Scooby-Doo</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Red Dragon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Lilo &amp; Stitch</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>The Scorpion King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Spy Kids 2: Island Of Lost Dreams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
20 Top-Rated Primetime Television Shows

Alphabetically, as reported by Zap2it.com (Baerg, 2003) for the season 9/2002 to 6/2003, and by TV Guide’s Top 10 Shows of the Season, released in 12/2002:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zap2it</th>
<th>TV Guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60 Minutes</td>
<td>Everybody Loves Raymond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alias</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Idol – Tuesday</td>
<td>Gilmore Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Idol – Wednesday</td>
<td>Law &amp; Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boomtown</td>
<td>Law &amp; Order: Criminal Intent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</td>
<td>Law &amp; Order: SVU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSI</td>
<td>Scrubs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSI: Miami</td>
<td>The Sopranos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curb Your Enthusiasm</td>
<td>Will &amp; Grace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.R.</td>
<td>Without a Trace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were 6 Zap2it Top 20 shows and 1 TV Guide Top 10 show that were unavailable during the period of data collection; these shows were suspenseful, real-life action shows whose conclusions are well-publicized, and that did not show in repeats during the data collection period. The Zap2it shows were: The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, NFL Monday Night Football, Survivor: Thailand, Survivor: Amazon, and Joe Millionaire. The TV Guide Top 10 show that was unavailable was 24.
Table 2.5

**Focus Group Interview Guide**

Note that this is a list of possible questions, and that not all questions were asked in each focus group.

- To begin, have you heard any anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered insults on or around campus? If it happens, how often does it happen?
- What are the most common sexual orientation-related insults you hear, and what are the contexts they happen in? For instance, do they happen with friends or do you overhear them from other people?
- When you hear such an insult, how do you feel? What do you think? Do you ever respond? If so, how and why?
- What do you think most people mean when they use words like faggot, gay, queer, homo, or any others you might hear?
- Can you think of anything else related to sexual orientation-related insults that you think I should have asked about?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insult Category</th>
<th>Insult Lists (N)</th>
<th>Field Data (N)</th>
<th>Media Data (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social-Personality</td>
<td>23.7 (344)</td>
<td>22.4 (71)</td>
<td>47.5 (311)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race-Ethnicity</td>
<td>14.9 (217)</td>
<td>3.8 (12)</td>
<td>4.0 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insults for Women</td>
<td>14.0 (204)</td>
<td>19.9 (63)</td>
<td>9.0 (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence / Lack Thereof</td>
<td>12.7 (185)</td>
<td>16.7 (53)</td>
<td>9.5 (62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicality</td>
<td>8.4 (122)</td>
<td>0.9 (3)</td>
<td>11.0 (72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>7.8 (113)</td>
<td>14.5 (46)</td>
<td>1.8 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scatological</td>
<td>5.2 (75)</td>
<td>9.1 (29)</td>
<td>4.0 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insults for Men</td>
<td>4.1 (60)</td>
<td>4.4 (14)</td>
<td>7.3 (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate Gender Role</td>
<td>2.5 (37)</td>
<td>1.6 (5)</td>
<td>1.2 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race &amp; Class Combined</td>
<td>2.0 (29)</td>
<td>1.6 (5)</td>
<td>1.0 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>1.9 (27)</td>
<td>3.8 (12)</td>
<td>1.8 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug-Related</td>
<td>1.5 (22)</td>
<td>0.9 (3)</td>
<td>0.4 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class / Economic Status</td>
<td>1.2 (18)</td>
<td>0.3 (1)</td>
<td>1.5 (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2

**20 Most Frequently Listed Insults by Interview Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insult (variations)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hoe / Whore (dirty -, ho, hoe, hore [sic], you’re [sic] [mother’s] a -)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigger (n—er, negro, niger [sic], nigga, you dumb -)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stupid (-blonde, -moron, you’re -)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ass (-hole, -kisser, -whole [sic], -wipe, jack -, nasty-, piss-, stank-, worthless -)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitch (b—ch, dirty -, you’re a -)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumb (dubm [sic], dum [sic], -ass, -blond, -muthafucker, dummy)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slut (little -, sorority -)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fag (art -, faget [sic], faggot (ass), fagot [sic], soccer -, you’re a fucken [sic] -)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retard (retarded, retarted [sic])</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat (-ass, -boy, -hamburger eating mother fucker, you’re -)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugly (-ass-hell, you’re -)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pussy (pus, puss clot, you smell like a -, you’re a -, shut your legs I can smell your -)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick (-head, needle-, small - bastard)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay (-ass, -bob, you’re -)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiot</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother fucker (M.F., MOFO, mothafucker, mother fucker, motherf—er)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cracker (craker [sic])</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignorant</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loser</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spic (spick, you dumb -)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.3

**10 Most Frequent Insults by Sex-Race Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Af-Am. Men (%)</th>
<th>Af-Am. Women (%)</th>
<th>White Women (%)</th>
<th>White Men (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td><strong>Nigger</strong> (100)</td>
<td><strong>Nigger</strong> (94)</td>
<td>1. Bitch (81)</td>
<td>1. Hoe/Whore (86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Bitch (85)</td>
<td>2. Hoe / Whore (83)</td>
<td>2. Hoe/Whore (67)</td>
<td>1. <strong>Ass</strong> (86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td><strong>Fag</strong> (69)</td>
<td>3. Dumb (78)</td>
<td>3. <strong>Fag</strong> (60)</td>
<td>1. Dumb (86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Hoe/Whore (62)</td>
<td>3. Stupid (78)</td>
<td>3. <strong>Ugly</strong> (60)</td>
<td>4. <strong>Fag</strong> (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Slut (62)</td>
<td>5. Bitch (72)</td>
<td>5. <strong>Nigger</strong> (53)</td>
<td>4. <strong>Pussy</strong> (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td><strong>Ass</strong> (54)</td>
<td>7. <strong>Ugly</strong> (56)</td>
<td>5. Retard (53)</td>
<td>4. Stupid (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Retard (39)</td>
<td>9. Fat (33)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Insults appearing in **bold** were significantly different by sex or race groupings.

These insults include the same list of variations included in Table 3.3
## Ten Insults Rated Worst

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insult (variations)</th>
<th>% of Participants</th>
<th>% of insults</th>
<th>% of Shows</th>
<th>% in Field Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N=72)</td>
<td>(N=655)</td>
<td>(N=50)</td>
<td>(N=317)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigger (n—er, negro, niger, nigga, you dumb -)</td>
<td>54.2 (39)</td>
<td>0.7 (5)</td>
<td>2.0 (1)</td>
<td>0.6 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitch (b—ch)</td>
<td>37.5 (27)</td>
<td>4.1 (27)</td>
<td>20.0 (10)</td>
<td>9.1 (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fag (faget [sic], faggot, you’re a fucken [sic] -)</td>
<td>31.9 (23)</td>
<td>0.5 (3)</td>
<td>4.0 (2)</td>
<td>6.6 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stupid (- blonde, - moron, you’re -)</td>
<td>27.8 (20)</td>
<td>2.3 (15)</td>
<td>24.0 (12)</td>
<td>7.6 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoe / Whore (ho, hore [sic], you’re [sic] (mother’s) a -)</td>
<td>20.8 (15)</td>
<td>0.1 (1)</td>
<td>2.0 (1)</td>
<td>4.4 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retard (-ed, retarted [sic])</td>
<td>16.7 (12)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>3.8 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugly (- ass-hell, you’re -)</td>
<td>16.7 (12)</td>
<td>0.5 (3)</td>
<td>6.0 (3)</td>
<td>0.6 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat (- ass, - boy, - hamburger eating motherfucker, you’re -)</td>
<td>13.9 (10)</td>
<td>1.4 (9)</td>
<td>12.0 (6)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherfucker (M.F., MOFO, mothafucker, motherf—er)</td>
<td>13.9 (10)</td>
<td>0.5 (3)</td>
<td>4.0 (2)</td>
<td>1.9 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuck (- you, - up, -er, -head)</td>
<td>13.9 (10)</td>
<td>0.3 (2)</td>
<td>4.0 (2)</td>
<td>4.7 (15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.5  

**Distribution of Worst Insults by Category**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insult Category</th>
<th>(N=359) Insults Marked</th>
<th>Total N of Insults in Category</th>
<th>% of Rated Worst</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race-Ethnicity</td>
<td>95 (26.5)</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>34 (9.4)</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insults for Women</td>
<td>61 (17.0)</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence / Lack Thereof</td>
<td>44 (12.3)</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicality</td>
<td>27 (7.5)</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insults for Men</td>
<td>13 (3.6)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>13 (3.6)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race &amp; Class Combined</td>
<td>6 (1.7)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class / Economic Status</td>
<td>3 (0.8)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate Gender Role</td>
<td>6 (1.7)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scatological</td>
<td>12 (3.3)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-Personality</td>
<td>45 (12.5)</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug-Related</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.6

**Insults Rated Worst Most Frequently by Sex-Race Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Af-Am. Men (%)</th>
<th>Af-Am. Women (%)</th>
<th>White Women (%)</th>
<th>White Men (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Nigger</strong> (85)</td>
<td>1. <strong>Nigger</strong> (67)</td>
<td>1. <strong>Nigger</strong> (53)</td>
<td>1. <strong>Fag</strong> (47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Fag</strong> (46)</td>
<td>1. Bitch (67)</td>
<td>2. Ugly (40)</td>
<td>2. <strong>Nigger</strong> (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Bitch (38)</td>
<td>3. Fuck (33)</td>
<td>3. <strong>Fag</strong> (33)</td>
<td>3. Retard (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Fag</strong> (17)</td>
<td>5. <strong>Fag</strong> (17)</td>
<td>5. Fuck (20)</td>
<td>5. Bitch (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ugly (17)</td>
<td>5. Ugly (17)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Slut (17)</td>
<td>5. Slut (17)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Insults appearing in **bold** were significantly different by sex-race groupings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insult (variations)</th>
<th>(N=317)</th>
<th>(N=187)</th>
<th>(N=130)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Used in Field Data (N)</td>
<td>% Overheard with Strangers (N)</td>
<td>% Used by RA’s Friends (N)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bitch (fucking -, psycho-)</td>
<td>9.5 (30)</td>
<td>8.6 (16)</td>
<td>10.8 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stupid (-fuck)</td>
<td>7.6 (24)</td>
<td>12.3 (23)</td>
<td>0.7 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ass (-hole, fucking-, suck ass)</td>
<td>7.3 (23)</td>
<td>2.1 (4)</td>
<td>14.6 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fag (-got)</td>
<td>6.6 (21)</td>
<td>8.6 (16)</td>
<td>3.8 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoe (-bag, 2nd class -, whore)</td>
<td>4.7 (15)</td>
<td>3.2 (6)</td>
<td>6.9 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retard (fucking -)</td>
<td>3.8 (12)</td>
<td>5.3 (10)</td>
<td>1.5 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douche (-bag)</td>
<td>3.5 (11)</td>
<td>1.6 (3)</td>
<td>6.2 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fucker(s)</td>
<td>3.5 (11)</td>
<td>2.1 (4)</td>
<td>5.4 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slut (-bag)</td>
<td>2.5 (8)</td>
<td>2.7 (5)</td>
<td>2.3 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherfucker</td>
<td>1.9 (6)</td>
<td>1.6 (3)</td>
<td>2.3 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay (-ass, -boy, -wad)</td>
<td>1.9 (6)</td>
<td>2.7 (5)</td>
<td>0.7 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumb (-ass, how – do you think I am?)</td>
<td>1.9 (6)</td>
<td>3.2 (6)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Bolded** insults appear on the list of participant rated worst insults.
Table 3.8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insult Category</th>
<th>(N=66)</th>
<th>(N=251)</th>
<th>(N=521)</th>
<th>(N=134)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Serious</td>
<td>% of Teasing</td>
<td>% of Serious</td>
<td>% of Teasing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-Personality</td>
<td>21.2 (14)</td>
<td>22.7 (57)</td>
<td>48.9 (255)</td>
<td>41.8 (56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence / Lack Thereof</td>
<td>4.5 (3)</td>
<td>19.9 (50)</td>
<td>10.2 (53)</td>
<td>6.7 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insults for Women</td>
<td>27.3 (18)</td>
<td>17.9 (45)</td>
<td>8.8 (46)</td>
<td>9.7 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race-Ethnicity</td>
<td>3.0 (2)</td>
<td>4.0 (10)</td>
<td>4.2 (22)</td>
<td>3.0 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>16.7 (11)</td>
<td>13.9 (35)</td>
<td>1.3 (7)</td>
<td>3.7 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scatological</td>
<td>13.6 (9)</td>
<td>8.0 (20)</td>
<td>4.6 (24)</td>
<td>1.5 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicality</td>
<td>1.5 (1)</td>
<td>0.8 (2)</td>
<td>10.6 (55)</td>
<td>12.7 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insults for Men</td>
<td>6.0 (4)</td>
<td>4.0 (10)</td>
<td>6.0 (31)</td>
<td>12.7 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate Gender Role</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>2.0 (5)</td>
<td>1.0 (5)</td>
<td>2.2 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race &amp; Class Combined</td>
<td>3.0 (2)</td>
<td>1.2 (3)</td>
<td>1.0 (5)</td>
<td>0.7 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>3.0 (2)</td>
<td>4.0 (10)</td>
<td>1.5 (8)</td>
<td>3.0 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug-Related</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>1.2 (3)</td>
<td>0.6 (3)</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class / Economic Status</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>0.4 (1)</td>
<td>1.3 (7)</td>
<td>2.2 (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.9

**TV & Movie Insult Means**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean # of Insults (Range)</th>
<th>Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Movies (N=30)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult comedies (N=4)</td>
<td>27.5 (19-40)</td>
<td>≈ 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult dramas (N=20)</td>
<td>17.1 (2-66)</td>
<td>≈ 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child comedies (N=4)</td>
<td>19.5 (12-31)</td>
<td>≈ 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child dramas (N=2)</td>
<td>7.0 (6-8)</td>
<td>≈ 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adult comedies (N=4)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult dramas (N=20)</td>
<td>17.1 (2-66)</td>
<td>≈ 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child comedies (N=4)</td>
<td>19.5 (12-31)</td>
<td>≈ 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child dramas (N=2)</td>
<td>7.0 (6-8)</td>
<td>≈ 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TV Shows (N=20)</strong></td>
<td>5.6 (0-14)</td>
<td>30 mins – 1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult comedies (N=5)</td>
<td>5.6 (1-14)</td>
<td>30 mins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult dramas (N=12)</td>
<td>5.8 (0-14)</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult news (N=1)</td>
<td>3.0 (3)</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult reality TV (N=2)</td>
<td>5.0 (2-8)</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Southpark (N=3)</td>
<td>28 (26-31)</td>
<td>30 mins)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 10 Most Frequently Used Insults in Movies and TV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Insult (variations)</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>N in 8 Mile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bitch</strong> (- ass, fucking -, -eroni)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ass (-hole(s), fucking -hole)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crazy (- eyes, - face, - lady, - motherfucker, -head)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog (dog, dogs)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stupid</strong> (- ass, - bimbo, -head)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loser (fucking -)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fat</strong> (- ass, - bastard, - fuck, - fucking ass, - man)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiot(s) (little -)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old (- man, - prick, - relic, - gal, -er geekier brother)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freak(s) (-y, - show)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Below the top 10, the percentages drop to less than 1%.

**Bolded** insults appear on the list of participant-rated worst insults.
Figure 4.1

Model of Insult Use

**Insulter Characteristics**
- Self-Concept
- Gender
- Age
- Upbringing/values/history
- Current mood
- Current Goals

**Social Cues to Read**
- Level of formality
- Target
- Degree of Accountability
- Appropriate language
- Anticipated responses

decide to insult

**Social Cues to Convey**
- Intent/Body language
- Appropriate language

**Target Response**

additional social cues, possible change in relationship, possible need for apology/repair

No Insult
Table 5.1

**Sexual Orientation-Related and Inappropriate Gender Role Adherence Insults Generated by Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alice</th>
<th>Pink (IO)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bitchy (IO)</td>
<td>Punk (IO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clam bumper</td>
<td>Pus (- clot)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocksucker</td>
<td>Pussy (You’re a -, you smell like a -, shut your legs cause I can smell your -)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dickless</td>
<td>Queen (FGO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dildo</td>
<td>Queer (quer, - bait)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t drop the soap</td>
<td>Rooster (translation from Lithuanian - IO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doo-doo chaser</td>
<td>Scrotum licking bastard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dyke (dike, you’re a fucken -)</em></td>
<td>Shit licker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fag (fagot, fagot, you’re a fucken -, soccer -, art -, fagot ass)</td>
<td>Shit packer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairy</td>
<td>Sissy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Soft (-ass [IO])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td>Suds boys (IO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl (girly, you hit like a -, you swing like a -)</td>
<td>Tina Marie (after Martina Navratilova, lesbian tennis player, used towards heterosexual man – IO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He’s got sugar in his tank (IO)</td>
<td><em>Toboy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heshe</td>
<td>Weak (IO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual (homo, homosexual weirdo)</td>
<td>Why don’t you lick my balls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay (you’re -, - ass, - bird [IO], - bob)</td>
<td>Why don’t you suck my dick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian (lesbo)</td>
<td>Wuss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light in the loafers (IO)</td>
<td>You suck dick (FGO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macha (IO)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansy (IO)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(IO) = Raised in interviews only – not on insult lists

(FGO) = Raised in focus groups only – not by interview participants

Insults in *italics* are directed towards women
### Synonyms for Sexual Orientation-Related and Inappropriate Gender Role Adherence Insults

#### Generically Negative Synonyms

**Gay only:** corny, freak, horrible, I don’t like it, kooky, lame, makes no sense, outcast, out of the ordinary, retarded, sucks, whack

**Fag/got only:** annoying, clumsy, dog, don’t disagree with me, I can’t believe you did that, you don’t want to do something that I want to do, off, you won’t go along with me, you’re getting on my nerves

**Punk only:** aggravating, sick

**Queer only:** out of place

**Gay and fag:** asshole (homo also), dork, dumb, irritating, loser, not any good, not cool, not fun, stupid, weird (queer also)

#### Synonyms with Gender Connotations

**Gay only:** caring, pink, sensitive, sweet

**Fag only:** bitch, girl, not macho, pussy, sissy

**Punk only:** afraid to speak your mind, coward, not aggressive, scared

**Gay and fag:** feminine (homo also), soft (homo & queer also), weak (pussy & queer also), you’re acting like a girl.

#### Synonyms with Sexual Orientation Connotations

**Fag only:** dress too nicely, dress too tightly, flaming, outfit doesn’t look right

**Gay, fag, & homo:** you’re acting like a homosexual
References


Iovine, J., Grazer, B., & Hanson, C. (Producers), & Hanson, C. (Director). (2002). *8 Mile* [Film].


**Appendix A**

**Insult Categories and the Insults Included in Each Category From Interview Participant Lists**

**Bolded** insults appear on the interview participants worst insult list; **Italicized** insults are the most frequently listed insults by participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Lists</th>
<th>Participant Lists</th>
<th>Field Data</th>
<th>Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SEXUAL ORIENTATION-RELATED INSULTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cocksucker, <em>faggot</em>, <em>gay</em></td>
<td>clam bumper, cum dumpster, cum eater, cum guzzler, cum licker, don’t drop the soap, doo doo chaser, dyke (dike), <em>fag</em> (including art <em>fag</em> and soccer <em>fag</em>), <em>faget</em> [sic], <em>faggot</em> ass, fairy, fruit, <em>gay ass</em>, <em>gay ass</em>, <em>gay boy</em>, <em>gay wad</em>, homo, I’m straight and I’m proud, lesbian, queer</td>
<td><em>ass</em> monkey, munch, butt fuck, butt monkey, cum bucket, eat my weiner, <em>fag</em>, flamer, flaming, fruit, <em>gay ass</em>, <em>gay boy</em>, <em>gay wad</em>, homo, I’m straight and I’m proud, lesbian, queer</td>
<td>bald cocksucker, blue collar Mary, bugger, <em>faggot</em> ass, horny bugger, insensitive cocksucker, little bugger, lovebirds (referring to men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*On Southpark: <em>gay)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INAPPROPRIATE GENDER ROLE ADHERENCE INSULTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>pussy</em></td>
<td>Alice, dickless, dildo, female, girl, girly, <em>pus</em>, <em>puss</em> clot, shut your legs cause I can smell your pussy, sissy, soft, tomboy, why don’t you lick my balls, why don’t you suck my dick, wuss, you hit like a girl, you swing like a girl, you’re a <em>pussy</em>, you smell like a <em>pussy</em></td>
<td>girly, girly boy</td>
<td>boobs, country boy, drag, drag queen, miss, punk <em>ass bitch</em>, <em>pussies</em>, woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(<em>On Southpark: (Little) wuss, pansy, sissy)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INSULTS FOR MEN</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bastard(s), prick, son of a bitch</td>
<td>chin nuts, cocky, <em>dick</em>, <em>dickhead</em>, fuckin [sic] bastard, gerbil nuts, limp, little bastard, mama’s boy, needledick, numb nuts, play in the show, playboy, player, S.O.B., scrotum neck, small <em>dick</em> bastard, wiener</td>
<td>all male whore, <em>dick</em>, <em>dickhead</em>, frat boys, fucking dogs</td>
<td>bad guy, cocky, dirty old man, dog(s), fucking guy, little man, low-life pimp, misogynist, motherless money-grubbing little son of a bitch, numb nuts, poor bastard, putz, rat bastard, sick bastard, silly old man, tough guy, wild man, wise guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(*On Southpark) bastard(s), dog, little bastards, little pecker, pompous son of a whore, son of a whore, stupid <em>dick)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Lists</td>
<td>Participant Lists</td>
<td>Field Data</td>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>redneck</td>
<td>country hick, ghetto, hick, hillbilly, hilljack, hood rat, hoodlum, poor white trash, redneck hillbilly loser, trailer park trash, trailer trash, white trash</td>
<td>corn-fed, trailer trash, trashy, where are you from – Indiana?, white trash</td>
<td>go back to your double wide and fry something, hick, hickass, lumberjack</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### RACE & CLASS COMBINED INSULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Lists</th>
<th>Participant Lists</th>
<th>Field Data</th>
<th>Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>bitch(es), cunt, hoe, slut, wench</strong></td>
<td>baldheaded (female), bimbo, blonde, chicken head, cumstain, cuntface, dependant upon a man, dirty bitch, dirty whore, easy, fucking cunt, gash, gold digger, grandma, hoochie, little slut, M.I.L.F. (mom I like to fuck), nymph, old bag, old maid, powder puffs, punta, skank, sneezer, sorority slut, stank-hoe, stupid blonde, toit, tramp, trick, whore, witch, you’re [sic] girlfriend (wife) looks like a man, you’re [sic] mother’s a whore</td>
<td>common tavern wench, cum dumpster, fucking bitch, fucking cunt, hoebag, psychobitch, second class hoe, skank, slut bag, stupid whore, trick, twat, wenchbug, whore</td>
<td><strong>babes, baby cakes, bitch ass, fucking bitch, bitcheroni, chick, dirty tramp, fish, floozy, fucking wife, goddess, hopped-up uber witch, little girl, little girlfriend, loose women with questionable morals, miss thing, nasty girl, nympho, silly girl, silly woman, smart enough for a girl, stupid bimbo, sweetheart, ugly old broad, vicious trollop, virgin, you certainly get around</strong> (On Southpark: bitch ass, evil bitch, hoe, little bitch, missy, she’s just a girl, stupid bitch)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### SCATATIONAL INSULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Lists</th>
<th>Participant Lists</th>
<th>Field Data</th>
<th>Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ass, asshole, dipshit, piece of shit</td>
<td>ass kisser, ass wipe, bomba clot, brown noser, butt kisser, butthead, butthole, jackass, nasty ass, piss ass, poop, poophead, shit, shit for brains, shit head, shit heel, stank ass, why don’t you kiss my ass, worthless ass, you’re a piece of shit, you’re an asshole</td>
<td>butthole, eat my shit, fucking asshole, get your head out of your ass, shit for brains, suck ass</td>
<td>a-hole, fucking asshole, bad ass, bum ass, buttwipe, candy ass, chickenshit, jackass, mad rambling ass, pile of squirming crap, shit, slow ass, smart ass, sorry ass, stubborn ass (On Southpark: butthole, buttmunch, fartboy, piece of ass, piece of crap, unholy butthole)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Lists</td>
<td>Participant Lists</td>
<td>Field Data</td>
<td>Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PHYSICALITY INSULTS</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ugly</strong></td>
<td>alright looking, baldheaded, big booty, big foot, blimp(-ie), blind, body odor, clumsy, cow, dirty, dusty, <em>fat</em> (-ass, -boy, -hamburger eating mother fucker), flatchested, four eyes, funky (smell), gross, have you ever heard of deodorant, heifer, hideous, lard, long hair, metal mouth, musty, nasty, okay looking, pizza face, Schweinhund/pig-dog, short, skinny, sloppy, smelly, stinky, stinky breath, <em>ugly</em> ass-hell, “_____ reminds me a lot of you” (not flattering), “He/she looks okay/alright”, “he’s going to be cute when he gets older”, “I see you’ve put on a little weight, but it looks good on you”, “She looks like a cute version of _____”, “She needs to pull away from the table a little sooner”, you’re <em>fat</em>, you’re <em>ugly</em></td>
<td>big head</td>
<td>bald, big, big ass girlfriend, black-eyed girl, blind, bony ass, bucktoothed, crazy eyes, dirt (-sandwich, -y, -little beast), drag queens could get a few tips from those aunts, <em>fat</em> (-ass, -bastard, -fuck, -fucking ass, -man), filthy little heads, filthy little hobbitses, frump girl, fucking B model, furry piñata, gross, guy with the expensive acne, hairpiece motherfucker, lumpy, mangy nut, nice cologne [you stink], old (-man, -prick, -relic, -gal, -geekier brother), overgrown, poor dresser, pretty boy, puny, scarface, shed some pounds, shorty, skinny aerobicized booty, skinny no diet ass, small (-fry), smelly, squirt, stink (-y, -y droolface), tall, tattooed, you are the worst dancer, you have rabies, you look like Randy Jackson hula dancing butt naked, you look terrible, your feet stink, your yellow teeth are troubling, you’re cleverer than you look</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(On Southpark: <em>Fat</em> (-ass, -boy, -so), porky, too damn old, tubby, who cut your hair – Stevie Wonder?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DRUG-RELATED INSULTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>drunk</strong></td>
<td>alcoholic, crack baby, crack head, crack whore, dope-head, druggie, junkie, lush, pot head, stoner, weed head</td>
<td>Burnouts, dopehead, what have you been smoking?</td>
<td>Drug lord, stoner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### RACE / ETHNICITY INSULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Lists</th>
<th>Participant Lists</th>
<th>Field Data</th>
<th>Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>African-American: nigga, nigger(s)</strong></td>
<td>Arab: a bin laden, A-rab, camel jockey, mud/oil slick, terrorist, towelhead</td>
<td>Arab: Iranian</td>
<td>African-American: monkey(s), stupid ass niggas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caucasian American: blancita, cracker, honkey, nazi, peckerwood, pink booty, pink toes, prejudice, racist, skin head, snow bunnies, straw biter, vanilla, white boy, white girl, white-washed, whitey, yankee</td>
<td>Caucasian American: nazi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Latino/a: border jumper, river rat, spic(k), wetback, you dumb spic</td>
<td>Latino/a: Chach</td>
<td>Latino/a: fat Puerto Rican ass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian: chinc(k), chine bastard, gook, Jap, rice boy, slanted eyes, slope</td>
<td>Asian: Indian, Pakistani, smelly Indian</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other groups: Amish, half breed [mixed racial background], immigrants, Jew, Jewish, kike (kyke), kraut [German], mick [Irish], mixed, wop [Italian], dego [Italian].</td>
<td>Other groups: Appalachian, foreigner</td>
<td>Other groups: American, beached Italian, bloodthirsty Turk, bloody Dutchman, crazy Dutch bastard, Dutch hater, loud breeding Greeks, mudblood [mixed racial background], southerners, ugly Turk, your people were swinging from trees [referring to backwards white people]. (On Southpark &amp; SNL: French people, fucking Jew, German people, Jewish, Jews).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>douchebag, jerk</td>
<td>abnormal, aggressiveness, annoying, anti-social, arrogant, baby, back slider [sic], back stabber, band geek, beat, black sheep, bland, bookworm, boring, brat, bum, callous, cheat, cheating, childish, conceited, corny, coward, crazy, creep, crude, deadbeat, demon child, dirt, disappointing, disgraceful, disgusting, dishonest, dork, drop-out, dweeb, ego-maniac, emotional,facist, fake, fanatic, flirt, flunkee, follower, fonny [sic; phoney?], freak, fuck (-face, -head, -up, -er, -hole), grit, hard guy, hateful, helpless, hipicrit [sic], hopeless, ignorant, immature, incompetent, inferior, insane, insensitive, irresponsible, jawbone, jerk off, jesus freak, jock</td>
<td>airheads, animated, buckethead, buddy, child, cockface, desperate, devil, dickhead, different, dingleberry, disgusting, disturbing, dorky, douche, dufus, dumbfuck, embarrassing, fartknockers, freak, fuck (-bag, -ers, -ing baby, -ing douche, -ing person, -nut, -stick), heathen, impotence, jerkass, joke</td>
<td>abomination, affront to nature, afraid, amateur(s), animals, annoying, arrogant, baby, big bad tiggy wiggy, big fat liar, big mouth, big pushover, bonehead, boring, bottom feeding, brat, bum, cheater, chief, choke artist(s), chumps, clown(s), cold, common criminals, could you be any louder, coward, cowboy, crazy (-face loser collection of pinheads, -lady, -motherfucker, -head), creep(s, -y, -crawler), criminal, cruel, crummy, cunning, cyanic, daisy may, dangerous, deceitful, defiant, democrat, desperate, disgrace, dry, dullard, egocentric, ego-maniac, Elvis, embarrassment to nature, evil, evil leprechaun, ex-con, false, fanatic, fascist(s), filthy little thieves, filthy spy, flake, Frankenstein, freak(s, -y, -show), fuck (-up, -ing disgrace, -ing liar, -ing losers, -ing punk), funny guy, gloating nincompoop, goblin, gone mental, greedy, guys on crack make more sense than you, hero, hooty tooty, hopeless, horse thief, hostile, house of ice – you must feel right at home, hyperactive, hypocrite, I am better than them, ignorant, immoral, incompetent, ingrate, insane, insignificant (-speck), intolerable, isn’t there someone else you can annoy, jack off, jealous, jerk off, Jessie James, Joe Pesci, joker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(On Southpark: Baby(ies), bad, dangerous, evil, freak, goofball, infidels, ingrate, jerk, Judases)
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| **SOCIAL-PERSONALITY INSULTS – BEGINNING WITH K-V**

| loser(s), motherfucker, princess | know-it-all, lame, lazy, left wing (-nut), liar, louse, low self-esteem, lucifer, M.F., mark, mean, mental, MOFO, momma’s (mommy’s) boy, mooch, mothafucker [sic], motherf-er [sic], naive, nark, natural born loser, nincompoop, nitwit, no respect for themselves or others, non-ballar, normal, nothing, nut case, oaf, obnoxious, odd, outrageous, pathetic, pervert, petty, piece of (-dirt, -jerk), pig, pissant, poser, prep, prissy, psycho, punk (-ass bitch), rat, rat scallion bastard, reject, religious freak, right-wing (-nut), rude, sad, scandalous [sic], scaredy cat, screw-off, scum, self centered, self-absorbed, selfish, show off, sick, silly, simpleton, sinner, sleezy [sic], slob, slug, smarty-art, sneaky, snitch, snob (-by), sorry, spaz, special, spoiled, square, stick, stuck up, sucker, superficial, takie (sic; tacky?), teacher’s pet, terrible attitude, thief, too passive, trifling, twit, two faced, typical, uncaring, undependable, unfaithful, ungrateful, unmotivated, unreliable, unsensitive, unskillful, unsuccessful, uptight, useless | liberal swine, moaner, psych major, putz, republicans, silly twit, stubborn, sucky, toad | keep your forked tongue behind your teeth, kidder, kidnapper, knucklehead, lame (-o), laughing boy, lazy (-beatnik), less than mediocre, liar, little (-abomination, -buddy), loud, lunatic, lying little shit, malcontent, maniacs, manipulative, McGyver, mean(-ie), meddler, mentally ill, mind-molding freaks, mole, monster(s), monstrosity, motherless fucks, mugger, murderer, nosy-body, nut(s, you’re -, -jobs), obnoxious, obtuse, pain, pal, party pooper, pathetic (-ally predictable), pervert(-ed), pervs, pesky, pest, pig(s), psycho, public menace, quicksand, radical, red guards, ridiculous, robots, rotten, rude, ruthless, sadists, scam artist, scandalous, scary, scumbags, scum of the earth, self-absorbed, selfish, shallow, sick, silly, slick, slime, snake, sneaky, snotty, spoiled, spooky, stinker, stubborn, sucker, sure-head, they can’t take a piss without wetting the front of their pants, thick, thief, thieves, tough, tricksy, troublemaker, trying too hard, two-bit, uber-tracker, uncivilized, ungrateful, unhappy, vampire, vicious |

*On Southpark:* lazyass, little liar, new kid, out of control, pigfucker, pottymouth, silly
### SOCIAL-PERSONALITY INSULTS – BEGINNING WITH W-Z

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<tr>
<td>wack, wall-flower, waste (-of human flesh, -of life, -ful), weak (-minded, -ling), weird (-o), wimp, worthless, wreckless, yellow bellied fool, you are nothing, you are selfish, yuppy, “You said you were writing about overcoming obstacles, but I don’t see where you were triumphant”</td>
<td>you fucking suck, you suck at life</td>
<td>war-mongerer, weakling, weasel(s), weird(-o), wicked, wimp, wiseass (-motherfucker), wish I could make you vanish, wormboy, wormy-worm, worried it will kill you to give a compliment, you are a sad strange little man, you can’t really sing, you drive me crazy, you have a horrible singing voice, you have a problem relating to others, you suck, you’re a little low on the food chain, you’re acting like a mental patient, you’re impossible, you’re nothing, you’re the kind of man who won’t support a woman’s ambition, you’ve got nothing to offer, yuppy, zorro</td>
<td>(On Southpark: weirdo (-freak))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### INTELLIGENCE / LACK-THEREOF INSULTS

<p>| dumb, idiot(s), moron, retard(ed), stupid | airhead, brainiac, brainless, clueless, dimwit, dolt, dumm [sic], dian [sic], dumb (-ass, -blond, -motherfucker, -my), fool, geek, imbecile, nerd, restarted [sic], shit eating moron, slack jawed yokel, slow, stupid moron, under achiever, “Oh so you’re in college now? What are you studying?” (tone of voice/cynicism/sarcasm), you’re stupid | brain dead, dumb ass, fucking retard, how dumb can you be, how dumb do you think I am?, stupid fuck, what the hell are you thinking? | look more clever than you are, brain working on outdated software, dope, dummy, fool(s), geek, genius, half wit, imbeciles, little idiots, lunkehead, mindless, nerds, rhinos have small brains, smarty-pants, stupid (-ass, -head), the sun has friend his brain, witless worm | (On Southpark: Dumbass(es), Einstein, fools, morons, retarded kid, stupid) |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CLASS / ECONOMIC STATUS INSULTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(None)</td>
<td>beggar, broke (meaning poor), broke-ass, broke-down, cheap, low budget, low-life, poor, rich kid, trash, trashy</td>
<td>(None)</td>
<td>Bikers &amp; low-lifes, carbuncle girl, homeless, low-life, poor, rich boy, rich playboy, trash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MISCELLANEOUS INSULTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Damned you (-all), freshman, goat, rocks, where did you learn to drive?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fuck, fuck you, God damnit</strong></td>
<td>comments on father or mother not being around, damn, family insults, fish, hell, I saw your brother last night on ESPN - he was in the special Olympics preview, non-driving <em>mother fucker</em>, piss off, shut up, uncle fucker, you can’t do that, you must have had an ugly mailman, you never going to be nothing, your daddy…. your mamma…</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bus driver, hooligans, meatloaf, pile of monkey nuts, porkchop, scooter, (you are) junk food, your mom eats cat poop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>