

“The N-Word: It Doesn’t Mean THAT Anymore – Or Does it?”

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Time: 1:00-3:00pm

Location: DDH 103E

Light refreshments provided.

Abstract: The N-word, a linguistic tool of racism, has been historically used, by primarily White Americans, to demean and degrade black Americans, and continues to be used in a derogatory manner by both blacks and whites in the present day American lexicon. Ironically, however, in addition to the derogatory use of the N-word, a contemporary non-pejorative variant of the term, “nigga”, has been used by people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, including black Americans; consequently, this apparent contradiction causes inter-racial confusion and miscommunication. Empirical studies have examined the use and perception of the N-word (“nigger”, “nigga”) among blacks in the United States (Motley & Henderson 2007; Rahman 2012; Spears 1998; Wiggins 2011), even among black college students (Dodson, 2010; Rasmussen 2013). In general, these studies show that many blacks consider and use the word “nigga” as a term of endearment in their interactions with other blacks. However, findings also show that there is a difference in the intent of the N-word, depending upon which version is spoken (“nigger” versus “nigga”) and the racial-ethnic background of the individual who says it. These existing findings have led us to consider whether nonblacks have the same interpretations of the N-Word as blacks. With a few exceptions (Hoffman, Wallach, Graham, and Sanchez 2009), there appears to be a paucity in this line of research in regard to the current perception and use of the N-Word among nonblacks, especially nonblack college students. Therefore, this research paper-in-progress focuses on the perception and use of the N-word (both “nigger” and “nigga”) among nonblack college students in California. We find our research timely since the use of the N-Word by nonblack celebrities (Paula Dean, Lisa Lampanelli, Riley Cooper) has been of great public interest in 2013.

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