



Who has the “Right” to Use the N-Word? A Survey of Attitudes about the Acceptability of Using the N-Word and its Derivatives

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Abstract

The N-word is the ultimate insult that has tormented generations of African-Americans. Yet over time, N-word derivatives have become popular terms of endearment by the descendants of the very people who once had to endure the N-word. Therein lies the root of an ongoing argument in society today: Who has the ‘right’ to use the N-word and N-word derivatives? A quota sample (N=347) of undergraduate students at a historically Black college/university in the deep-South participated in this survey study. Participants were mostly Black (88%) and female (62%). Using a five-point semantic differential scale from ‘always’ to ‘never’, participants were asked the degree to which they believe it is acceptable to use the N-word and N-word derivatives. A majority (76%) of respondents agreed that it is never acceptable for non-Blacks to use the N-word with anyone in any situation. Fifty-six percent of respondents agreed that it is never acceptable for anyone to use N-word derivatives with anyone in any situation.

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1. Introduction

The N-word (*ni**er*) is unique in the English language. It is the ultimate insult; a word that has tormented generations of African-Americans. In 2008, Neal A. Lester, dean of humanities at Arizona State University, taught the first ever college-level class designed to explore the N-word. According to Lester, as early as the 17th century, the N-word has been used to address African-Americans in a derogatory way (Price, 2011, p. 3). It has always been a sign of disrespect. The word is inseparably connected with viciousness and severity on African-American minds and deprecatory slanders cast on Black bodies. Yet over time, due to a slight tweak to the spelling and pronunciation of the end of the word, N-word derivatives (*ni**a*, *ni**as*, *ni**az*) have become popular terms of endearment by the descendants of the very people who once had to endure the N-word (Price, 2011, p. 1). Among many young people today—Black and White—N-word derivatives can mean ‘friend’, and therein lies the root of an ongoing argument in society today: Who has the ‘right’ to use the N-word? Who has the ‘right’ to use N-word derivatives?

Many African-Americans suggest that White people should not use N-word derivatives in any context. However, many White people see nothing wrong with using them as long as they are pronounced correctly, and as long as African-Americans continue to use them.

While there is no shortage of anecdotal or experiential evidence on this subject, there is a dearth of formal research (exceptions include Fogle, 2013; and Hoffman, Wallach, Graham, & Sanchez, 2009). As one of the most taboo and controversial words in the English language, formal study of its use may help develop the picture of attitudes behind its use. The purpose of this study is to measure attitudes about the acceptability of using the N-word and its derivatives. This paper will first describe the relationship between language and culture. The N-word and its derivatives are two specific cases that illustrate this language-culture relationship. Next, consequences of co-opting a culture’s language are presented followed by a description of special challenges with N-word derivatives.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Language and Culture

Language evolved as early humans began to live in large communities which required the use of complex communication to maintain social coherence. Sapir (1958) stated: “Human beings do not live in the objective world alone ... but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society” (p. 69). Whorf (1940) claimed that:

We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. (p. 213-214)

In other words, when we create concepts based on the world around us, those concepts are not just standing there, objectively obvious to any observer. It is to a large extent the linguistic systems that we all carry around in our brain that not only affect but actually determine which concepts will be ‘distilled’ out from the world and which ones will not.

Culture is transmitted from one generation to another through language. Language and culture then both emerged as a means of using symbols to construct social identity and maintain coherence within a social group. Humans use language as a way of signaling identity (convergence) with one cultural group and difference (divergence) from others. Even among speakers of one language, several different ways of using the language exist and each is used to signal affiliation with particular subgroups within a larger culture. A community’s ways of speaking are a part of the community’s culture, just as are other shared practices. Shared language use is a way of establishing and displaying group identity and solidarity.

Cultural emphasis is an important aspect of a culture which is often reflected through language and, more specifically, vocabulary (Ottenheimer, 2006). This means that the vocabulary people use in a culture indicates what is important to them. As linguist Stephen

Pinker (2005) put it, “Language is not so much a creator and shaper of human nature so much as a window onto human nature”. This is similar to the notion of linguistic determinism, which states that the form of language determines individual thought. As American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956, p. 156) put it, language and culture have “grown up together”.

Slang is a prime example of how a culture’s language constructs and reflects social identity and maintains coherence within a social group. Slang is a kind of language consisting of very informal words and phrases. It is synonymous with phrases that are used in such a way that their significance is different from what they literally mean. An example would be the word ‘ace’ in ‘she is an ace softball player’. Here the word ‘ace’ means excellent, exceptional, and skilled rather than a playing card or die marked with or having the value indicated by a single spot. Slang may also be peculiar to a region or a community, and therefore unintelligible outside it. Slang is more common in speech than in writing. Slang words are often used in a particular context or by a particular group of people. Slang often arises as a form of in-group communication, an attempt to identify with one’s friends, family, social class, occupation, ethnic group, or age group. It can be a kind of private language, devised to keep out the uninitiated or to test who is a member of a particular group. It can also be a kind of shorthand, an informal style of speaking (or writing) that evokes a feeling about how things are being said. Most slang is short-lived. As a term makes its way into the larger language, it usually loses its special slang flavor and may be replaced by a new term. Relatively few slang terms may persist for generations, though not in the original group. The N-word and, more recently, N-word derivatives are intense examples of slang words that have taken on a life of their own.

Many Americans refer to themselves as [descriptor]-American (e.g., Latino-American, African-American, Gay-American, etc.). Others say these hyphenations are both unnecessary and divisive and that we should all just be Americans. This phenomenon serves as a window into whether a person identifies first and foremost as being American, or that preserving their individual heritage and history

are equally (and sometimes more) important self-identifiers. These labels, especially those used to describe self, are fundamental to one’s identity individually and collectively as a member of a group. An outsider using another group’s slang is often met with a variety of unpredictable and usually negative consequences.

The truth is that no one truly has the right to prohibit another person from saying any word they want. Freedom of speech is fundamental to America, but with that freedom comes responsibility. Anyone can yell ‘fire’ in a crowded theater. However, there are consequences for doing so. Anyone can say an untrue statement about another knowing that the statement is untrue and knowing that it will cause harm. This is called slander. Anyone can say it, but there is a law against it and there can be negative consequences for the guilty party. In the US, slander is a civil matter, not a criminal one. A person cannot go to jail for it, but the court can order the guilty party to pay damages at the amount that it sets. Since no one has exclusive rights to a word (outside of trademarks), the question is not “Who has the ‘right’ to use the N-word?” but rather “What are the potential consequences of using the N-word?” This seems to depend on who is saying it, to whom are they saying it, and most importantly, in what context (Demby, 2013). The potential consequences of co-opting another culture’s language will be addressed after describing the N-word and N-word derivatives.

2.2. The N-Word

The historical backdrop of the N-word (*ni**er*) is regularly followed to the Latin word *niger*, which means black. No matter what its origins, by the early 1800s, it was firmly established as a derogative name. During slavery, the words ‘*ni**er*’ and ‘Black’ were often embedded before a first or given name (e.g., *ni**er* John or Black John). In the 21st century, it remains a principal term of White racism, regardless of who is using it (“Nigger,” n.d.). In the US, the N-word has almost always been viewed as derisive. “Even when African-Americans discuss appropriating and re-appropriating the N-word, the toxic substance is still there. No level of appropriating can free it of that blood-soaked history” (Price, 2011, p. 3). The word is so provocative that journalist, columnist, and

professor, Frank Harris, has developed a website, the N-Word Project (<http://n-wordproject.tumblr.com/>). This web site solicits and compiles accounts by people of all races describing their experiences with and thoughts about this fraught word. A team of *Washington Post* journalists has also created a web site (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdr/featu/res/the-n-word>) which explores the history of the word, its evolution, and its place in American vernacular today. Its compilation of videos captures people's experiences with and reactions to the N-word.

African-American journalist Roi Ottley wrote in 1943 that "the term [*ni**er*] is used by Negroes openly when out of the earshot of Whites" (as cited in Kennedy, 1999-2000, p. 89). African-American writer Clarence Major, who examined the N-word in his 1970 *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang*, stated: "At the point when utilized by a White individual in tending to a Black individual, the N-word is usually hostile and deriding" (as cited in Kennedy, 1999-2000, p. 89). Major added, nonetheless, that "when used by Black individuals among themselves, the N-word is a racial term with feelings of warmth and positive attitude, reflecting ... a tragicomic sensibility that is aware of African-American history" (as cited in Kennedy, 1999-2000, p. 89). Dictionary.com provides this usage alert for the N-word:

[It] is now probably the most offensive word in English. Its degree of offensiveness has increased markedly in recent years, although it has been used in a derogatory manner since at least the Revolutionary War. It is so profoundly offensive that a euphemism has developed for those occasions when the word itself must be discussed, as in court or in a newspaper editorial: "the n-word". Despite this, the sense referring to a "Black person" is sometimes used self-referentially among African-Americans in a neutral or familiar way. ("Nigger", n.d., n.p.)

On one hand, African-American hip-hop artists liberally use the N-word claiming it is a term of endearment. On the other hand, White Americans such as Bill Maher and Laura Schlessinger have been degraded and

emotionally beaten for saying the N-word. In August 2010, Schlessinger said the N-word ten times on her radio show. She was having a conversation with a Black female caller about the caller's husband's White friends' use of the N-word. She was attempting to prove the point that there should be no problem with them saying the N-word since African-Americans say it all the time. Schlessinger stated:

Black guys use it all the time. Turn on HBO and listen to a Black comic, and all you hear is *ni**er, ni**er, ni**er*. I don't get it. If anybody without enough melanin says it, it's a horrible thing. But when Black people say it, it's affectionate. It's very confusing. (Schabner & Marikar, 2010, para. 7)

The backlash from this event was so severe that Schlessinger eventually quit her job as a radio host. In contrast, Jay Z said the N-word 63 times in his song, *The Story of OJ*. He received no backlash at all. Why? Because he is Black.

There are those who once embraced the N-word, but who are now coming forward with a changed perspective on it. For example, Russell Simmons, founder of the legendary hip-hop label, Def Jam, that signed Public Enemy and Run DMC, stated his belief that people, and rappers in particular, should stop saying the N-word. Simmons stated, "The [N-word] is a racially derogatory term that disrespects the pain, suffering, history of racial oppression, and multiple forms of racism against African-Americans and other people of color" (Wyatt, 2015, para. 9). Many African-Americans believe this to be true. However, there are others, such as Jay Z and Ice Cube, who have a different outlook on the word. They have stated that the N-word belongs to the African-American community now, and it should be embraced as a term of endearment. In Ice Cube's response to Bill Maher after he used the N-word on his show, Cube said, "When I hear my homies say it, it don't feel like venom. When I hear a White person saying it, it feel[s] like [a] knife stabbing me even if they don't mean it" (Carmichael, 2017).

According to many African-Americans, White people should not be allowed to use the N-word in any context. Their position is that no one of any non-Black race should use the word due to

its harsh history. Essentially no one ethnic group has any more of a right to use a specific word or phrase than the next. The constant thought in the Black community is that the N-word should be used only by Black people. This perspective has resulted in an ongoing double standard—Blacks can say it, non-Blacks cannot (Harkness, 2008).

Utilization of the N-word in African-American culture is perplexing in that it can be utilized lovingly, politically, or disparagingly. There is increasing consensus that the N-word is an offensive term regardless of race, source, receiver, or context. At the same time, however, the N-word has undergone a change.

2.3. N-Word Derivatives

The N-word has now morphed into derivatives (*ni**a*, *ni**as*, *ni**az*) with slightly different word endings and pronunciations. This is the Black community's attempt to re-appropriate the N-word. These alternate spellings and pronunciations have a more positive meaning within the Black community (Hicks, 2007; Rahman, 2012). Two factors that have contributed to widespread use of N-word derivatives are their constant and pervasive use in comedian routines and in hip-hop music lyrics.

The use of N-word derivatives began as early as the 1980s. From comedians such as Cedric the Entertainer and Bernie Mac to rap groups such as NWA—Niggas with Attitudes—N-word derivatives were a constant staple. Every Friday night at midnight, the very popular half-hour stand-up comedy show, Def comedy Jam, created by Russell Simmons, would be nationally televised. This show featured many Black, cutting-edge comedians who frequently used these derivatives in their acts (Marriott, 1993).

A 1993 New York Times article described how rap music 'embraced' the N-word. They repackaged and sold these words not only to urban neighborhoods but also to largely White suburbs (Marriott, 1993). This gave rise to White hip-hop fans becoming comfortable using N-word derivatives as terms of endearment the same way Black people did. In his song *Straight up Nigga*, Ice-T raps, "I'm a nigga in America, and that much I flaunt". And

yet, ironically, a vast majority of his records were sold in White communities. N-word derivatives remain a pervasive part of hip-hop culture with no signs of slowing down anytime soon. Rappers such as Jay Z, Kendrick Lamar, and others have all expressed that they have no problem with using these words and that they plan to continue using them. In his song *I*, Kendrick Lamar raps, "Well, this is my explanation straight from Ethiopia / N-E-G-U-S definition: royalty; King royalty – wait listen / N-E-G-U-S description: Black emperor, King ruler, now let me finish / The history books overlook the word and hide it" (Wyatt, 2015, para. 3). These lyrics explain what this N-word derivative meant in Ethiopia. In a 2009 interview on the nationally televised Oprah Winfrey Show, Jay Z expressed why he has no problem with saying N-word derivatives in his music. "People give words power, and our generation took the power out of that word and turned it into a term of endearment" (Carter, 2011).

By re-appropriating a negative label, Blacks have sought to renegotiate the meaning of the N-word, changing it from something hurtful to something empowering. In so doing, they are attempting to positively differentiate their in-group from other out-groups to enhance group distinctiveness. This form of bolstering is called positive distinctiveness. A re-appropriated N-word may positively revalue attributes that previously had been considered negative (Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom, & Bodenhausen, 2003). One argument in favor of this re-appropriation is that "the more a black person uses the N-word, the less offensive it becomes" (Hutchinson, 2001, p. 1). The claim is that they are "cleansing the word of its negative connotations so that racists can no longer use it to hurt blacks" (Hutchinson, 2001, p. 1). That is, self-labeling defuses the impact of derisive terms by making the word more commonplace. By re-appropriating the N-word and refusing to approve its use by others, Blacks exert control over its use in the public sphere thereby increasing feelings of identity, solidarity, and power.

However, by forbidding use of the N-word by a non-Black person, the word may actually come to be more hurtful. Not only would a non-Black person using the N-word call up all the oppressive connotations of the word, he or she

would also be explicitly defying the will of the stigmatized group. Thus, the threat and offense of the word may be magnified. This is not to say that the use of the N-word should be commonplace, but to point out that only when a re-appropriated word is allowed to be articulated by both the in-group and the out-group will the word truly become re-valued (Galinsky et al., 2003).

This begs the question: Who is allowed to use N-word derivatives as a form of endearment? Blacks only? Those who grew up with hip-hop? And what are the potential consequences for those who use these derivatives but are seen as someone who does not have the right to do so? This so-called “right” to use a word is central to the notion of language as a cultural identifier signaling identity (convergence) with and difference (divergence) from others. Use of a word or term by an outsider may be met with resistance and otherwise negative response from the in-group.

2.4. Consequences of Co-Opting a Culture’s Language

For Blacks who believe that the N-word and its derivatives are a part of their culture only, anyone else who uses them would be seen as co-opting these words. Co-opting another culture’s language is often met with negative attention. When then-presidential candidate Ronald Reagan campaigned in Macon, Georgia, he used phrases like “how ‘bout them dogs!”. He even attempted a Southern “ya’ll”. The local crowds recognized his attempts to “speak their language”, but he was an outsider, a Californian. He did not have the ‘right’ to come to the deep-South and attempt to sound and speak like true Southerners! It was amusing to a few but off-putting for most.

When a waitress calls the restaurant patron ‘sweetie’ or ‘sugar’, they are using terms of endearment and intimacy with complete strangers. The waitress is communicating a relationship that does not exist. She is co-opting the language of those who *are* in a relationship with the restaurant patron. The result is often a reluctant tolerance by the patron and frustration, jealousy, and/or anger by anyone who is actually in a relationship with the patron. All the while, the waitress likely

uses these terms out of habit with little thought and with no ill-intentions.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, a writer at the *Atlantic* and author of *We Were Eight Years in Power*, explains that his wife calls him ‘honey’. It would not be acceptable, Coates states, for strange women to do the same. Likewise, his father’s nickname is Billy, but it would be awkward for Coates to use that nickname for his father. “That’s because the relationship between [me] and my dad is not the same as the relationship between my dad and his mother and his sisters who he grew up with. We understand that” (Lopez, 2017, para. 3-4). Coates’ implication is that White people should not use the N-word or its derivatives because they do not have the same kind of relationship with African-Americans as they do with other Whites, nor do they share their history.

When a White professor uses an N-word derivative in his class, the consequences can be severe. Eric Tiffin is a White adjunct instructor of public health who has been teaching at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU) for 32 years. In February 2018, Tiffin was suspended for singing along with a song that a student played at the beginning of class, a rap song that included the lyrics, “I am a happy niggah”. Eric Clinton, president of the Black Student Union at SCSU, posted a video on Facebook stating that students should not be subjected to racial slurs. The article, which appeared in *Inside Higher Education*, did not specify whether Clinton did so in response to instructor Tiffin’s suspension. The president of the university, Joe Bertolino, stated:

Our university abhors the use of racist or hateful words and actions and we will confront these incidents if and when they occur. I ask you once again to join me in promoting a campus environment...in which every member of our community feels valued and is treated with dignity and respect. (Jaschik, 2018, para. 7)

The student who played the rap song in class has not been suspended.

Does the instructor feel valued? Is he being treated with dignity and respect? He did not write the lyrics; he just sang along with a song. But that offended at least one Black student in

the class enough that instructor Tiffin was suspended. Does repeating what has already been written assign guilt to the one doing the repeating and not to the original author? That is what is being suggested in this case. Or has the instructor been suspended because he allowed the song to be played in class? Those details were not included in the story. Jack White, former *Time* magazine columnist and adjunct professor of journalism at Virginia Commonwealth University, stated:

Let's face it: Not all words are the same. It's all about context, and we can't have it both ways. We can't brag about setting the styles in music, dress and slang that Whites later slavishly copy, and then be upset because the pattern recurs. (Samuels, 2007, p. 76)

Parks and Jones (2013), in their published research article, "Nigger": A critical race realist analysis of the N-word within hate crimes law, state that:

... within the realm of hate crimes law, courts should presume racial animus where a White person uses the N-word while committing a crime against a Black person. Furthermore, despite high rates of Black usage of the N-word and high rates of implicit anti-Black biases among Blacks, a law of intra-racial hate crimes among Blacks predicated upon their usage of the N-word would be fruitless. This is so given that the N-word means something differently when used intra-racially among Blacks than when directed at Blacks from Whites. (p. 1)

This position asserts the presumption of racial animus when a White person uses the N-word, but it does not make this presumption for Blacks despite the admission that there are high rates of anti-Black bias among Blacks.

Parks and Jones (2013) cite the hate crime case of Nicholas Minucci (White) who beat Glenn Moore (Black) with a baseball bat and robbed him while repeatedly screaming the N-word. Minucci's defense argument was that he had Black friends, was immersed in Black culture, and used the N-word as part of his everyday vocabulary. Thus, his defense argued, his use of the N-word did not reflect racial prejudice or

racial animus. Part of Minucci's defense was testimony by two Black men – hip-hop producer Gary Jenkins and Harvard Law Professor Randall Kennedy – both of whom testified that the N-word is not necessarily a racial epithet. Minucci lost the case. In short, having Black friends, being immersed in Black culture, and using the N-word as part of your everyday vocabulary does not exempt a White person from being guilty of racial prejudice if they use the N-word while committing a crime against a Black person. Determining intent and motivation by one's use of the N-word and its derivatives is reasonable *and* problematic, logical *and* paradoxical, declarative *and* presumptive.

2.5. Specific Challenges with N-Word Derivatives

Attitudes and opinions about the use of N-word derivatives range from 'it is acceptable for anyone to use these words with anyone else', to 'it is only acceptable for Blacks to use these words when referring to other Blacks with whom there is a close relationship'. For those who support the notion that Blacks only are permitted to use N-word derivatives, how black does someone need to be? Twins Maria (Black) and Lucy (White) Aylmer are the daughters of a half-Jamaican mother and a White father (Perez, 2015). Can Maria use N-word derivatives, but her sister cannot? And what about Mariah Carey? She is one-quarter Black. Her mother is Irish, and her father is African-American and Venezuelan (Owen, 2015). Singer-songwriter, Ben Harper, is also one-quarter Black with a father who was African-American and Cherokee, and a mother who was Jewish. Model and Gossip Girl actress, Jessica Szohr, is also one-quarter Black. Her paternal grandfather was Hungarian and one of her grandparents was African-American. And there is also Soledad O'Brien, the former CNN anchor. She is half-Black; the daughter of an Afro-Cuban man and an Australian mother (Owen, 2015). Is it acceptable for these White-looking celebrities to use N-word derivatives? If so, then what about others whose heritage may be African, but who look White? Paris Jackson, daughter of the late pop star Michael Jackson, told *Rolling Stone*, "I consider myself Black". Her mixed-race background has been a source of confusion before, she explained. "Most people that don't know call me White.

I’ve got light skin, and, especially since I’ve had my hair blond, I look like I was born in Finland or something” (Prinzivalli, 2018, para. 4).

For those who support the notion that having grown up within the Black culture gives them the exclusive right to use N-word derivatives, how would someone be able to look at someone else and ascertain what their cultural background has been? That is, how would a person know that they have the cultural ‘right’ to use N-word derivatives?

Anyone can be offended by what anyone else says. But if the offense depends on skin color or one’s cultural background, which is not always obvious to the average reasonable person, then who actually has the ‘right’ to use N-word derivatives? And how does this account for those who are *not* offended regardless of who says the N-word derivatives? That is, if the judgement of offense is neither consistent nor universal, then who is the enforcer of when, where, and how offensive the use of N-word derivatives really are? Should these words be banned from everyone’s vocabulary? And if not, should everyone, no matter their skin color, be allowed to use them? What are college students’ attitudes and opinions about this issue? This leads to two primary research questions:

RQ₁: For whom is it acceptable to use the N-word?

RQ₂: For whom is it acceptable to use N-word derivatives?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

It seems altogether fitting that the sample for this first exploratory study of attitudes about the acceptable use of the N-word and its derivatives is taken from those who represent the in-group, those who have stated, in the popular literature and elsewhere, that these words are a part of their culture and heritage. A quota sample (N=347) of undergraduate students at a historically Black college/university (HBCU) in the deep-South participated in this study. Within the sample, most (88%) are Black, 7% are multi-racial. The majority (62%) are female and 38% male. Almost the same proportion (86%) reported that most of their friends are Black, 8% reported their friends are multi-

racial. A quota sample ensured that undergraduate students were proportionally represented in the sample by year-in-school classification. That is, 43% were freshmen, 20% sophomores, 16% juniors, and 21% seniors. These sample characteristics are consistent with the population from which the sample was derived. Based on the population of the undergraduate student body, this sized sample provides a confidence interval (margin of error) of plus/minus 5% and a confidence level of 95%. That is, from the results of the sample, one can be 95% sure that the true percentage of the population is between plus and minus 5%.

3.2. Instruments

A paper-and-pencil survey instrument asked participants the degree to which they believe it is acceptable to use the N-word and N-word derivatives. Most (36) of the 47 questions in the survey were affirmatively worded statements with a five-point semantic differential scale response option from “always” to “never.” These questions presented a variety of sender and receiver combinations. For example, “It is acceptable for *anyone* to use the N-word with anyone”. And, ‘It is acceptable for *Black* people only to use N-word derivatives, but only with people of their own race and gender, and only as a term of affection and friendship’. In the first of these two example questions, the sender is anyone and the receiver is anyone. In the second example, the sender is Black people only and the receivers are those of the same race and gender. The second example also added intent that the N-word derivatives were being used only as a term of affection and friendship. Participants were also asked their level of agreement that the N-word and its derivatives mean something different for young people than for older people (“Caribbean Nationals”, 2013). Two open-ended questions asked participants to write why they feel they way they do about the use of the N-word and its derivatives. Demographic questions included race, gender, and their year-in-school classification. A copy of the survey instrument is included in the Appendix of this paper.

3.3. Procedure

With approval of the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), surveys were distributed

in academic classrooms during regularly scheduled class times during spring semester 2018. Surveys were generally completed in about ten minutes. No extra-credit was provided for completing the survey. Data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The number and percentage of responses for each response option for each question were tabulated and reported in the Results section.

4. Results

4.1. Overall

The largest proportion of agreement on any question in the survey was the 76% of respondents who agreed that it is never acceptable for *non-Black* people to use the N-word (ni**er) with anyone in any situation. The least answered questions asked how 'black' does a person need to be for them to have the right to use the N-word or N-word derivatives; 5% and 7% respectively did not answer those questions. Opinions were mixed when asked whether it is acceptable to use the N-word or its derivatives only if they are repeating what someone else said or wrote. Similarly, opinions were mixed about whether the N-word and its derivatives mean something different for young people than for older people. Responses from non-Blacks (N=43) mirrored those from Blacks (N=304).

4.2. The N-word

The majority of respondents (53%) reported that the N-word is best defined as a word used to say that a Black person is inferior. A majority of respondents (67%) agreed that it is never acceptable for *anyone* to use the N-word with anyone in any situation and that the word is always or almost always offensive (61%). There was no majority view on the question of whether it is acceptable for *Black* people to use the N-word with anyone in any situation—26% said always or almost always, 41% said sometimes or almost never, and 33% said never. A clear majority (76%) of respondents agreed that it is never acceptable for *non-Black* people to use the N-word with anyone in any situation. A slightly smaller percentage (73% in each case) agreed that it is never acceptable for *non-Black* people to use the N-word with people of the same race, with people of the same race and only as a form of affection and

friendship, with people of the same race and gender, with people of the same race and gender and only as a form of affection and friendship, and with people of any race but only as a form of affection and friendship. A slim majority (51%) reported their perception that males use the N-word more than do females. Among those who stated that they listen to "a lot" of hip-hop music (n=209), they were split about who uses the N-word more, males (48%) or neither males nor females (46%). A majority (63%) stated that a person needs to be at least 50% black for them to have the right to use the N-word. Responses were mixed as to whether it is acceptable to use the N-word only if repeating what someone else said or wrote and whether the N-word means something different for young people than for older people.

Respondents were provided one open-ended question which asked them to explain why they feel the way they do about the use of the N-word. Of the 260 who responded, eight had no opinion. Twenty (8%) stated the idea that "African Americans are the only ones who can say the N-word, no other race can, especially [not] Whites since they used the word to disrespect us" and "White people are not allowed to say it". Thirty (12%) stated that no one should use the N-word because it is "a word that was used to describe slaves and we are no longer slaves". Sixty-two (24%) stated that it is not a bad word "because it is a part of the culture that we live in today" and they "do not have a problem with it". One hundred forty (53%) stated the opinion that the N-word is "flat out offensive", that they "hate the word", and that "it is a bad word entirely".

4.3. Summary of Findings: The N-word

1. The N-word is best defined as a word used to say that a Black person is inferior.
2. The N-word is *always* or *almost always* offensive.
3. Males use the N-word more than do females.
4. A person needs to be at least 50% black for them to have the right to use the N-word.

It is NEVER acceptable for anyone to use the N-word with anyone in any situation.

Opinions were MIXED as to whether it is acceptable for...

- ...Black people to use the N-word with anyone in any situation.
- ...someone to use the N-word if they are repeating what someone else said or wrote.

Opinions were also MIXED as to whether the N-word...

- ... is offensive if used with someone you know.
- ...means something different for young people than for older people.

4.4. N-Word Derivatives

The majority of respondents (68%) reported that N-word derivatives are best defined as words that are used among Blacks as an expression of affection and friendship. Despite this definition, a majority (56%) of respondents agreed that it is never acceptable for *anyone* to use N-word derivatives with anyone in any situation. Fifty-two percent indicated that N-word derivatives are sometimes offensive. As was the case with the N-word, there was no majority view on the question of whether it is acceptable for *Black* people to use N-word derivatives with anyone in any situation—31% said always or almost always, 44% said sometimes or almost never, and 24% said never. A majority (63%) of respondents agreed that it is never acceptable for *non-Black* people to use N-word derivatives with anyone in any situation. A slightly larger percentage (65% in each case) agreed that it is never acceptable for *non-Black* people to use N-word derivatives with people of the same race, with people of the same race and only as a form of affection and friendship, with people of the same race and gender, with people of the same race and gender and only as a form of affection and friendship, and with people of any race but only as a form of affection and friendship. A robust majority (71%) reported their perception that males use N-word derivatives more than do females. The majority of respondents (67%) who stated that they listen to “a lot” of hip-hop music claimed that males use them more. A slightly smaller majority (63%) stated that a person needs to be at least 50% black for them to have the right to use N-word derivatives. Responses were mixed as to whether it is acceptable to use N-word derivatives only if repeating what someone else said or wrote, whether the N-word means something different for young people than for

older people, and whether it is offensive if used with someone you know.

Respondents were provided one open-ended question which asked them to explain *why* they feel the way they do about the use of N-word derivatives. Of the 221 who responded, forty-two (19%) stated the notion that N-word derivatives “can be used by Blacks and only by Blacks”, “if you are Black you have the right to use the word for greeting or hanging out, but it’s our word that stays in our culture,” and “if you’re not Black, don’t use it”. Of those who answered the open-ended question, an equal number (N=90 or 41%) stated that it *is* acceptable as those who stated that it is *not* acceptable to use N-word derivatives. Those who claimed it *is* acceptable stated “they are used for friendships or for joking”, and “they are used with friends when being playful”. Among those who stated that using N-word derivatives is *not* acceptable, common sentiments included: “Black people put a twist on it and think it has changed the meaning. Black people use derivatives amongst themselves, but as soon as a non-Black person uses them, Blacks are pissed. If we want others to stop using them, we have to start with ourselves and stop using them also”. Other comments included “using derivatives is a distinction without a difference, they are just as offensive” and “they shouldn’t be used at all”.

4.5. Summary of Findings: N-Word Derivatives

1. N-word derivatives are best defined as words that are used among Blacks as an expression of affection and friendship.
2. N-word derivatives are *sometimes* offensive.
3. Males use N-word derivatives more than do females.
4. A person needs to be at least 50% black for them to have the right to use N-word derivatives.

It is NEVER acceptable for non-Black people to use N-word derivatives with anyone in any situation.

Opinions were MIXED on whether it is acceptable for...

- ... Black people to use N-word derivatives with anyone in any situation.

- ...someone to use N-word derivatives if they are repeating what someone else said or wrote.

Opinions were also MIXED about whether N-word derivatives....

- ...are offensive if used with someone you know.
- ... mean something different for young people than for older people.

5. Discussion

This sample of mostly Black mostly female undergraduate students at an HBCU in the deep South confirms views expressed in popular literature, national media, and current culture. The N-word is a word used to say that a Black person is inferior. It is never acceptable for *anyone* to use the N-word with anyone in any situation. The word is offensive, and it is hurtful. N-word derivatives are words that are used among Blacks as an expression of affection and friendship. However, it is never acceptable for *anyone* to use N-word derivatives with anyone in any situation. A small proportion of the total sample (N=42, 12%) expressed the notion that N-word derivatives can be used by Blacks only. This small minority may view self-labeling N-word derivatives as a means to diffuse the negative connotations of the N-word. By reclaiming names formerly soaked in derision, an individual exerts his or her [control and power] and proclaims his or her rejection of the [previous] presumed moral order (Galinsky et al., 2003). Write-in responses were evenly split on the question of whether it is or is not acceptable for Blacks to use these derivatives. About one-fourth of the total sample stated N-word derivatives are used by Blacks with Blacks friends in a joking, playful way. Another fourth stated that using derivatives is a distinction without a difference that they are offensive, and they shouldn't be used at all. This is consistent with conclusions Fogle (2013) reached in his qualitative analysis of the social acceptability of the N-word and its derivatives. These competing views fuel the ongoing dilemma, conflict, and confusion about the use of N-word derivatives.

Most of the write-in answers to the two open-ended questions did not address the *why*. Respondents were asked to explain *why* they

feel the way they do about the N-word and its derivatives. However, most of the answers simply re-stated their view rather than explaining *why* they hold that view.

Clearly a broader more diverse sample needs to be extracted and examined going forward. What do Asians in California think about this issue? What about Hispanics in Texas or Whites in Oklahoma or Connecticut? Only then will the full picture be developed.

The purpose of this study was to measure attitudes about the acceptability of using the N-word and its derivatives. Generations of mothers have been heard to say, "if you can't say anything nice, then don't say anything at all". This sage advice seems both appropriate and applicable to this issue today. The challenge is determining whether or not the words are "nice" and that often depends on who is asked.

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