

# LOOKING DEEPER AT...

## The N Word Discussion Guide



# Looking Deeper At... The N Word

*How might we help people recognize the profound impact of saying the word “n-gg-r” regardless of intention?*

**A Note to Facilitators:** Using the word “n-gg-r” in a discussion will make some members of your group uncomfortable and it may be controversial. In fact, facilitators themselves may be uncomfortable and struggle with knowing whether or not to say the word out loud. Because of this, you should exercise good judgment when choosing whether or not or how to use the word “n-gg-r” in your work. It is important to know that there is a significant difference between using the word and referring to it as a word.

People in a general audience will have a range of sensitivities to the word that will evoke a variety of powerful, emotional, and unpredictable responses to hearing the word “n-gg-r” in a discussion. Remember that the most effective learning sometimes happens when people are outside of their comfort zone. However, making people too uncomfortable can prevent them from being able to learn anything at all.

## OVERVIEW

The topic of the word “n-gg-r” came up over and over in our conversations with the participants in the film. Use of the word seems to vary across generations and in popular youth culture. Use of the word can be cavalier – as Kahleek and Terrence said in this scene in the film, they hear the word “at least a thousand times a day.” For this workshop, Dr. Eddie Moore addressed this topic head-on and used it as a springboard to push the students to look deeper into their own personal biases and beliefs.

Discussions of this scene often - and about the word, in general - focus around the question of who can and who can't say “n-gg-r.” When President Obama said the word in a 2015 interview, it generated controversy of this nature. The following questions seek to help push the discussion beyond that common question so that we can examine how that word has contributed to our unconscious biases.

## OBJECTIVES

- To raise awareness about how diverse groups are affected by and perceive the word “n-gg-r”.
- To create more dynamic thinking across populations about the word “n-gg-r” and its uses.
- To encourage people to work beyond common responses to the use of the word “n-gg-r” and not simply ignore, reject, or accept it as a part of popular culture.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Prior to seeing the N-Word Workshop scene in **I'm Not Racist... Am I?**, what did you think about the use of the word “n-gg-r” in America?
2. Did your opinion change after seeing the film?
3. How might responses to the use of the word “n-gg-r” vary for people across identifiers like race, class, gender, and ethnicity?
4. Dr. Moore encouraged the workshop participants to ask themselves if the word “n-gg-r” is still in their “membrane.” What do you think Dr. Moore meant by that?
5. Dr. Moore explained that the word “n-gg-r” is like “pollution.” What did he mean when he made this comment? Do you agree or disagree with his claim?
6. What are other examples of cultural conditioning?
7. What is the relationship between cultural conditioning and systemic racism?
8. What are some cultural equivalents to the word “n-gg-r” in America?
9. Try your own visualization exercise with word associations using other terms, either positive or negative. What images come to mind when you hear words like “American” or “bitch”? How do those images relate to how we view and treat the people who fit into those categories? How do you think specific images come to be associated with specific words?
10. The scenes where the participants are working with Dr. Moore include two particularly difficult moments – Sacha saying “you” to Dr. Moore during the visualization exercise and Martha asking Dr. Moore if his son is a “halfie.” How did these incidents make you feel? What do they suggest about how people learn to interact with people outside of the familiar circles of their everyday lives? What differences did you notice in the way the students in the film reacted to Martha and how they reacted to Sacha?
11. What opinions about the word “n-gg-r” from the film were the most valid from your point of view? Are there important opinions that were not represented?

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, CONT'D

12. Try to recall the last time you encountered the word “n-gg-r”. Where were you? Who used it? What was your reaction or response in the situation? Do you think that responses to the word vary across populations based on race, gender, generational make-up, or economics?
13. How is the use of the word “n-gg-r” similar or different to the use of other racial epithets? Is it ever acceptable for people to use racial epithets to describe people of their own race? Is it ever ok for people to use derogatory language to describe characteristics of people with whom they themselves identify?
14. Most of us have read or heard the word “n-gg-r” in literature and music – the word is used in rap music and hip hop as well as novels like **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**, **To Kill A Mockingbird**, and **Their Eyes Were Watching God**. Is it different for the word “n-gg-r” to be used in literature or music as opposed to casual conversation? Why or why not?
15. There was a lot of pushback from the participants in the film during Dr. Moore’s workshop about the word “n-gg-r”. Why do you think this was the case? What specific topics seemed to cause the pushback? In the end, what lessons do you think the participants took away from this particular workshop?
16. Dr. Moore states that there is no “one size fits all” response to dealing with use of the word “n-gg-r”. At the end of the clip, he suggests that dialogue, not simply disapproval, is vital to ending the “pollution” of the word. What ideas or framework do you think should always be in place during dialogues about the word “n-gg-r”?