

Prejudice: Revealed Through Words

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Prejudice is having a negative attitude toward a person based on group membership. A person can be prejudiced without revealing this attitude through discrimination. Discrimination is when someone treats people differently depending on their group membership. Racism is characterized by both prejudice against certain racial groups and differential treatment based on that group membership; it is often combined with feelings of superiority and is usually built into society's structure.

In the United States, racism against non-whites has been normalized for centuries. It is to the point that many people have a difficult time recognizing these "normal" practices as racist. Comedy often gets a pass when it comes to discriminatory language. People write off comedian's harmful words and actions as dark humor when these things would not be acceptable to say in a conventional career. These jokes are usually based on harmful stereotypes, thus reinforcing their place in society. However, Michael Richards takes this to another level in his tirade.

This rant was not simply a setup or a punchline for a joke. He says these things in response to hecklers who, although they cannot be seen in videos, are presumably African American. He repeatedly calls them the n-word, which historically has been used to insult African Americans. Richards also says things about messing with the white man and where it gets people. This reveals his feeling of superiority and abuse of the structure that enables it. When compared to extreme images of bigotry like lynching and slavery, his rant seems very tame. When thinking about the definition of racism, however, Richards' words towards those hecklers are very clearly racist.

Intent: Does It Matter?

It is hard to find a person who will openly admit their prejudice. Even if their actions are openly discriminatory, they will very rarely label themselves a bigot because of the negative association society has placed on the word and many like it. Most of the time, a racist's goal is simple: to execute pain and remain superior to another race. Michael Richards' tirade that night was no different.

A heckler is someone who interrupts a speaker, such as a comedian, with unnecessary, and sometimes aggressive, comments. Interruptions by such people should be expected by any comedian. Richards reacted in a very poor manner for someone who does comedy regularly.

Although there are many better ways to deal with hecklers, this racist display was his way to get back at these people for interrupting his show. By shouting racist comments at the hecklers, Richards reached his goal of getting them to stop. Though it was not his intent, when he decided to use slurs and other racist language against these hecklers, he effectively revealed his prejudice.

He presumably would react in a very different manner, such as calling security, if the hecklers were a different race. Richards intended to hurt his hecklers when he called them the n-word and discussed the harm that would have befallen them in another time period. He knows that his actions were not acceptable for another race, so he knew they would cause harm.

When the goal of any racist display is to execute pain, the intent of Richards' comments does not matter. Because he is in the public eye, he should know that anything said in public will be used as a measure of his character. Further, he has been active as an actor, writer, and producer for decades; he should know there is a standard for acceptable language and actions.

Slurs and Prejudice

A slur is a word whose use is tied to prejudice and is often used in a derogatory way. Typically, use of a slur reveals prejudice against the group it describes. In Michael Richards' case, use of the n-word was derogatory and intended to cause harm. Attitudes, such as prejudice, are often reflected in spontaneous behavioral reactions. Use of slurs in a spontaneous situation like Richards' rant are obvious reflections of racist intent. However, slurs can also be used in educational material to teach the significance of the words. In addition, slurs are increasingly being used by affected groups in a movement known as "reclamation." African American communities use the n-word in a similar way as calling one another friends. Similarly, the LGBTQ+ community may use the f-slur to describe themselves, and women may call each other the b-word in an endearing way. As society evolves, so does the meaning behind these words.