

The Uses and Implications of the Term “Retarded” on YouTube
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Abstract: In this article, we provide a historical glimpse into the changing use of terminology for people with intellectual disabilities. In order to determine how the word *retarded* is currently used in popular culture in the United States, we analyzed one hundred randomly selected YouTube videos with the word retarded in the title. Five themes emerged: (a) the traditional use of the term retarded, (b) the use of retarded in humorous context, (c) the use of retarded to insult or criticize, (d) the term retarded as a substitute for other words, and (e) the slang use of retarded in a hip hop context. The coexistence of these multiple definitions is an unprecedented situation in the history of disability terminology. While advocates in the US are pushing for abandonment of the “R” word, establishing rules about language use is clearly a simplistic solution to a complex problem.

Key Words: retarded, disability terminology, YouTube.

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Introduction

The US federal government has used the term *mental retardation* as a special education classification since the passage of The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. However, many school districts and professional organizations in the United States no longer use the term. For example, The Arc, the primary parent and family advocacy organization for people with intellectual disabilities, no longer uses the term mental retardation because it “was offensive to many people” (The Arc, 2004). Instead, in their mission statement, The Arc uses the terms *children and adults with cognitive, intellectual, and developmental disabilities*. The American Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), the primary professional organization in the field, uses the term *developmental and intellectual disabilities* (Prabhala, 2007).

Currently, many people use the word *retarded* in a derogatory manner (Walsh, 2002). The meaning and context of retarded has changed over time and is now used in everyday language to imply a person is “foolish or socially inept” (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2006). More recently, this term is being used in a variety of ways on the Internet video-sharing site, YouTube. YouTube specializes in brief videos created and submitted by users and reports 10 hours of video footage uploaded every minute (Sarno, 2008).

In light of these situations, there are two research questions that guided this study (a) How has use of the term *retarded* changed over time?, and (b) How is the term *retarded* used on YouTube? For consistency purposes, the term *intellectual disability* will be used in this paper in place of the more controversial mental retardation.

A Brief Chronological History of Mental Retardation Terminology

Prior to 1700

Although historical accounts of individuals with disabilities date back to ancient civilizations (Berkson, 2006; Patton, Beirne-Smith, & Payne, 1990), *idiocy* is one of the oldest disability terms and its use can be traced to the 13th century. While the word *idiot* is now used as demeaning slang, the origin of the Greek word *idiotus* simply meant “a person who does not take part in public life” (Patton, Beirne-Smith, & Payne, 1990, p. 36). This characterization indicates the beginning of labeling for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

1700 to 1900

During this period of time, the notion in Europe was that all people were created equal and, therefore, even those who had disabilities should be given rights (Patton, Beirne-Smith, & Payne, 1990). The individualized educational approach of French physician Jean-Marc Itard revolutionized the treatment of individuals with developmental disabilities. The belief in the equality of all people spread to the United States, and in 1855 Samuel Gridley Howe founded the Massachusetts School for Idiots and Feeble-Minded Youth in Boston (Verstraete, 2005).

The term *feble-minded* began to replace the term *idiot* during the 19th century (Noll & Trent, 2004; Walsh, 2002). In 1876, the Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Persons was formed as the first professional organization in the disability field (Reynolds, 2006). By 1892, almost every state in the United States had at least one residential training school for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Minnesota Department of Education [MDE], 2004).

1900 to 1940

Throughout this time period in the U.S., individuals with intellectual disabilities began to be perceived as a burden and menace to society. Residential training schools were converted into warehouse-type institutions. Concurrent with the institutionalization movement, eugenics was advocated as a means of controlling these individuals who were blamed for many of the social problems of the day (Elks, 2004; Noll & Trent, 2004; Patton, Beirne-Smith, & Payne, 1990). Professionals in the medical field desired a way of categorizing individuals who were labeled *feble-minded* and consequently, created the subcategories: *moron*, *imbecile*, and *idiot* (Noll & Trent, 2004; Walsh, 2002). Henry H. Goddard, an American intelligence researcher in the early 20th century, coined the term *moron* to refer to individuals who would now, in the United States, be classified as mildly mentally retarded (Greenspan 2006; Smith & Smallwood, 2007). The term *imbecile* was used to refer to individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities and *idiot* was used to describe those who had severe intellectual disabilities (Noll & Trent, 2004).

1940 to 1975

During the 1940s, conditions and treatment in institutions in the U.S. came under public scrutiny (Noll & Trent, 2004). Terminology also began shifting during this time to encompass the term *mental deficiency* (Greenspan, 2006; Noll & Trent, 2004; Walsh, 2002). The name for the professional organization in the field was changed from the American Association for the

Study of the Feeble-minded, a title it gained in 1906, to the American Association for Mental Deficiency (AAMD). According to Greenspan (2006), the term mental deficiency was used until the early 1960s.

As this term began to acquire negative connotations over time, there was a push among disability advocates to use the label *mental retardation* (Walsh, 2002). Acceptance and empathy began to replace society's previous feelings of fear and disdain. In the United States, parents of individuals with disabilities became advocates for their children and began to organize. A notable result of this was the beginning of the National Association for Retarded Children, the primary advocacy group for parents (MDE, 2004; Noll & Trent, 2004).

According to Hewett and Forness, this parental and professional advocacy, combined with federal, state, and private funding, provided great impetus to the field in the U.S. (as cited in Noll & Trent, 2004). From the 1960s through the early 1980s, individuals with intellectual disabilities were classified by the level of care they required using the educational subcategories of *educable mentally retarded (EMR)*, *trainable mentally retarded (TMR)*, and *custodial* (Beirne-Smith, Ittenbach, & Patton, 2002; MDE, 2004). These categories reflected societal attitudes favoring services for individuals with intellectual disabilities, regardless of the severity of their disability.

1975 to Present

In 1975, The United States Congress passed The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), which ensured that all children with disabilities were entitled to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive educational setting (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006). In 1990, this law was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a name change that emphasized "person-first" language. However, the federal IDEA designation for students receiving educational services in this category was unchanged. Educators, researchers, clinicians, and other professionals in the United States continued to use the term mental retardation (Goode, 2002).

IDEA was reauthorized again in 1997 and 2004 with no changes to the federal category of mental retardation. Recently, advocacy groups in the U.S. have supported changes to federal and state educational categories to an alternative term such as *cognitive* or *intellectual disability* (Prabhala, 2007). In fact, terms other than mental retardation are now used by 25 states to classify students with intellectual disabilities. Forty-three states continue to use the federal definition or a slight derivation of it (Muller, Markowitz, & Srivastava, 2005).

There are many reasons for these seemingly never-ending changes to disability terminology, the main one being that the terms used to describe people with intellectual disabilities have consistently taken on demeaning connotations (Smith & Smallwood, 2007). Consider for example, the everyday use of the terms moron, imbecile, and idiot, terms which were once used to describe individuals with mild to severe intellectual disabilities. Their changed meanings indicate that simply adopting new names to identify those individuals appears to be a short-term solution (Prabhala, 2007; Smith & Smallwood, 2007; Walsh, 2002).

The concept of an intellectual disability is highly fluid and subject to change. Students in U.S. schools are classified as mentally retarded based on how they score on tests such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC). Classification levels on these tests are arbitrarily set. At one time, the upper limit for classification was 85 (Heber, 1961), and in the following decade, it was 70 (Grossman, 1973; 1977). While this change led to a decrease in the number of individuals considered mentally retarded in the U.S., updated tests with new norm groups can create the reverse situation. If every state had switched from the WISC-R to the WISC-III when the latter was introduced in 1991, the number of individuals in the United States labeled mentally retarded would have doubled (Gladwell, 2007). Although it is important to recognize the socially constructed nature of the disability that gives rise to the mentally retarded label, the focus of this article is on the changing nature of the terminology used to describe those so classified.

The extant literature that explores the fundamental nature of the relationship between language and disabilities is limited in scope and reveals mixed findings. Little to no research has been conducted to determine the relationship between language and intellectual disabilities in new electronic-media domains such as YouTube. This research attempts to fill this gap.

Communication and YouTube

YouTube is available in 24 different countries in 6 continents, in addition to the worldwide version. Viewers can select the country content they would like to view, as well as the language for the website text (YouTube, 2010a). With 35 hours of video uploaded every minute (YouTube, 2010b) and 2 billion videos watched per day (YouTube, 2010c), YouTube is the leading forum on the Internet through which people can share, watch, and comment on videos. People can share videos by uploading them from personal computers, mobile devices, or by recording directly on to the site (YouTube, 2010b). With the increased accessibility of the Internet and the many user-friendly options to share videos without needing electronic expertise (Sandoval, 2006), people are fulfilling their desires to have a voice. In fact, in 2008, YouTube was granted a Peabody Award and was described as a “Speakers’ Corner” that both embodies and promotes democracy (Peabody Awards, 2008).

Since being launched in February 2005, the uses and purposes of YouTube have expanded exponentially to include almost anything. People who become members of YouTube can have personal channels to which other viewers can subscribe. YouTube has progressed from allowing people their “15 minutes of fame” (Warhol, 1979) to creating overnight stars. As Palfrey and Gasser (2008) point out, these new forms of expression are unlike anything the world has seen before. A cooking series, “Show Me the Curry,” which was started by two stay-at-home moms, is now a channel with almost 19,000 subscribers. Academic scholars and professors have produced videos in order to share their lectures and explain new concepts in their fields (Young, 2008). Scientists from the University of California, San Francisco have joined YouTube in an effort to drive medical research (Driving Medical Research via YouTube, 2008). The US Internal Revenue Service has joined the YouTube community by creating four 30-second videos explaining the process of claiming tax rebates from the economic stimulus plan (Kutz, 2008). Video instruction of learning another language can easily be accessed by a simple YouTube

search. It is even possible to watch video clips of television shows and music videos from previous decades.

It is difficult to find a societal topic that has not made an entry into the YouTube community. It seems as if everybody wants to be in on this new form of electronic communication. In 2007, YouTube even started annual video award recognitions, a situation that created overnight stars. Tay Zonday won the 2007 YouTube Musician of the Year award and subsequently appeared in the US financial newspaper *The Wall Street Journal* and the entertainment-centered *PEOPLE Magazine*, as well as numerous shows on US television (Zonday, 2008). Because of his popularity on YouTube, Judson Laipply, creator of the all-time most viewed video on YouTube, *Evolution of Dance*, was invited on to Oprah, The Today Show, and the Ellen DeGeneres Show (Oprah After the Show with Mr. Evolution of Dance, 2008; Smith S., 2007). In 2006, an ordinary man in Hong Kong became front page news in that country after a video of him arguing with a passenger on a bus was uploaded to YouTube, and shortly afterwards became the most viewed video on YouTube (CNN.com International, 2006). Although these individuals' newfound fame began on YouTube, it quickly filtered into mainstream popular culture. The simple and straightforward manner in which this process takes place demonstrates the growing influence and popularity of YouTube. The research described in this article explores how the rapid transmission of ideas through YouTube has affected the use of terms related to individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Method

Procedure

On November 6, 2007, the word *retarded* was entered into the YouTube search engine using the default "relevance" setting and 45,600 hits were returned. To reduce the sample, the list of returned videos was analyzed for selection features. An examination of the text associated with the videos revealed that after the first 400 videos, the word *retarded* did not consistently appear in the title. Many videos after this point contained the word in the author's description or in the comments section written by viewers. Therefore, only the first 400 videos were retained for the initial pool. To ensure that the videos had been viewed by a large number of people, only those videos that had been viewed a minimum of 1,000 times were retained. Videos were then removed from the sample if they had not been on YouTube for at least 3 months. These sorting criteria were established to produce a sample of videos containing the word *retarded* in the title that had been viewed with high frequency for an extended period of time.

This initial sort produced a sample of 222 videos. These videos were copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word document to create a numbered list of still video images containing the embedded hyperlinks, allowing for immediate access to the live videos on YouTube. An online random number generator was used to compile a list of 100 random numbers, which were then used to select videos from the list. This resulted in a final sample of 100 randomly selected YouTube videos.

Data Analysis

Using qualitative techniques, the researchers used consistent procedures to record information about each video and analyze the data. The YouTube website provided factual information about each video. Before watching each video, the following information was recorded on the front of a large note card: (a) the title of the video, (b) the summary written by the individual who posted the video, (c) the date the video was added to YouTube, and (d) the number of times the video had been viewed.

The videos were viewed multiple times by both researchers. Notes were taken and compared to reach consensus throughout the process. An emergent research design was used to code and categorize the videos. First, the researchers watched the videos to determine where the word retarded was used (e.g., title only, song lyrics, dialogue, printed text). These data indicated initial ways to categorize the videos. The researchers watched the videos again to determine the referent (e.g., other people, things/objects, nonhuman characters, actions). The use and tone of the word (e.g., negative, neutral, positive) were then recorded along with the purpose of the word use (e.g., humor, criticism, education). The format of the video (e.g., live footage, animation, music performance) was also documented. Videos were watched as many times as was necessary to obtain this information. These initial categories were then recorded on the back of each video note card.

A review of these categories revealed four main video formats and these were each broken down into several subcategories. Further analysis of the data revealed three more relevant categories. These included: (a) whether individuals were aware of their being filmed for a YouTube video; (b) whether individuals were pretending to have, or actually had, an intellectual disability; and (c) whether text, music, or dialogue was added to existing footage. Videos were then viewed to determine the use of retarded in each of these contexts (e.g., people with disabilities who were unaware of being filmed, original animation using the word retarded in title/dialogue). Table 1 was then created with counts of the videos that fell into each category. Some overlap occurred in this section between altered animation, live footage, and music lyrics.

The researchers then began an ongoing process of grouping themes from the individual videos and categorizing these into common themes among all videos. Direct quotes from the videos and the synopsis added by the individuals who submitted the videos were used to verify and clarify identified themes and categories. The index cards were read and reread to determine recurrent uses of the word retarded. Five themes were identified. Again, the researchers conferred and reached agreement over the uses of the word retarded and the naming of themes. These themes are described in the following section.

Results

Overview

Table 1 shows the four main video formats in the YouTube videos, along with the way *retarded* was used and the number of videos in each category.

Table 1. Video Format of Retarded

Use of word	Number (<i>N</i> = 100)
Live Footage	
People with disabilities - unaware of being filmed	2
People with disabilities - aware of being filmed	4
People without disabilities acting as if retarded	9
People without disabilities - word retarded used in title or verbally in video	30
Music Video	
Black Eyed Peas song, "Let's Get Retarded"	18
Original song with retarded in lyrics	9
Altered Animation	
Existing animation with dialogue containing word retarded dubbed over original	3
Existing animation with text containing word retarded added	10
Existing animation with music containing word retarded dubbed over original	10
Existing animation with alterations - word retarded used in title	6
Original Animation	
Animation and dialogue created - word retarded used in title and/or dialogue	9

Almost half of the videos ($n = 46$) were classified as live footage. These videos included footage of individuals who had disabilities, but did not appear to be aware of the fact that they were being filmed. There were also videos of people who had disabilities and appeared aware of the fact that they were being filmed, albeit not necessarily for a video that would be posted on YouTube. Of those individuals who did not have disabilities, some were performing the part of a person with an intellectual disability. In the majority of cases ($n = 30$), however, the word retarded was used in the title or verbally in the video.

A considerable number of the YouTube videos included music lyrics containing the word *retarded*. Of the 27 videos that fell into this category, 18 were based on the Black Eyed Peas song, "Let's Get Retarded." The videos that featured this song were presented in various formats including (a) animations with the song as a soundtrack, (b) videos of people dancing to the song, and (c) images or photo clips set to the song. The lyrics contained in the remaining videos ($n = 9$) were written by a variety of individuals with the only commonality being use of the term retarded.

Over one-third of the videos ($n = 38$) were animations. These videos were categorized according to how they were created: (a) existing animations from television shows or video games, (b) altered existing animations, or (c) original animations. The alterations of existing animations varied, but uniformly used the word retarded in the new creation.

Table 2 shows how the word retarded was used in the YouTube videos. Specifically, it shows the referent and whether the use was negative, positive, neutral, traditional, slang, or unidentified, along with the number of videos that fell into each category. Some of the videos fell into multiple categories.

Table 2. Context of Retarded

Retarded referent	Number
Title only	9
Unidentified/arbitrary use	9
To refer to self	8
Negative use	2
Traditional use	6
To refer to others	25
Traditional use	3
Negative use	22
To refer to things/objects	10
Neutral/positive use	5
Negative use	5
To refer to nonhuman characters	16
Traditional use	2
Negative use	14
To refer to actions	7
Neutral use	2
Negative use	5
Song lyrics	27
Unidentified/arbitrary use	9
Slang use “get crazy,” “have fun”	18

Note: “Traditional use” refers to situations in which the word was used to describe a person/animated character with an intellectual disability.

A small portion ($n = 9$) of the videos contained the word retarded solely in the title. In some cases ($n = 3$), the word in the title was referring to the created video, but in the other instances, the word retarded did not seem to be referring to anything in particular. In one-third of the videos, the term retarded was used to refer to people. In 6 of 8 cases where an individual used the word as a self-description, the person actually had an intellectual disability. Such instances were considered to represent traditional use of the term. Ten videos used the term retarded to refer to objects or things, such as cars, Internet browsers, and the videos themselves. The authors of half of those videos ($n = 5$) used the term in a way that illustrated pride in their video creations. Such use was determined by the researchers to be a neutral or positive use of the word.

The word retarded was used to describe nonhuman characters in 16 videos. Nonhuman characters were typically animals or animated characters. In two of these cases, the nonhuman characters were actually portrayed as having an intellectual disability. Seven of the 16 videos used the term retarded to refer to the actions of individuals in the videos.

Song lyrics formed the largest context for the use of retarded, accounting for 27 of the videos. The use of retarded in 18 of these cases referred to the slang use meaning to “have fun.” The remaining nine videos used the term retarded in an arbitrary way that was unidentifiable to the researchers.

Themes

Five themes emerged from the analysis of the term retarded in the YouTube videos: (a) the traditional use of term *retarded*, (b) the use of *retarded* in humorous context, (c) the use of *retarded* to insult or criticize, (d) the term *retarded* as substitute for other words, and (e) the slang use of *retarded* in hip hop context.

Traditional Use of Term Retarded

The term mentally retarded became an official special education classification in the US with the passage of P.L. 94-142 in 1975 (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006). For the following two decades, the term was used in everyday language without much controversy. As the term came to take on negative connotations in popular culture, many advocacy organizations and state education departments saw the need to abandon the term and replace it with a new one. Use of the word retarded by people with intellectual disabilities in the YouTube videos indicated that despite official changes, these people continued to use the word in its traditional sense. This suggests that official changes to terminology do not necessarily change the way that people identify themselves, or if they do, there may be a time factor involved. This quote from an individual on YouTube illustrates this point:

“Asking me to see being called ‘retarded’ as an insult is asking me to choose a medical over a social category.... The word ‘retarded’ just means ‘slow.’ I don’t know what the big deal is about being thought of as slow. By some standards I am slow, very slow. This does not mean that I think it’s okay to use the word ‘retarded’ as a substitute for ‘stupid’” (About Being Considered “Retarded,” 2006).

In another example, Josh Perry, an individual with Down syndrome, who stars in the popular *Retarded Policeman* series, (each video has been viewed 1.5 to 2 million times) appears with his sister who states, “He is an actor,” and “He is hilarious” (Perry, 2007). Josh and his sister acknowledge that Josh has Down syndrome and that he is an actor who wants to act for a living. It is implied that Josh understands his disability and is “using it” to his advantage to act in the *Retarded Policeman* series on YouTube. A search of the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) revealed that Josh Perry is represented by an agent in Los Angeles, California, and has appeared in cable television shows in parts that did not involve his disability. This situation indicates that

Josh chooses to use the term retarded in its traditional sense and that he embraces this identity to perform certain roles and further his acting career.

Use of Retarded in Humorous Context

When the word retarded was used in a humorous manner in the YouTube videos, it appeared that the intent was not to be deliberately offensive. The word was being used in videos created for the purposes of entertainment. An example of this use was evident in the video, *Retarded Kids Show* (2006), in which puppets and actors in costume acted out a skit. While the word retarded was not used in the video, the implication through its use in the title and the accompanying content of the video was that the performance was intended to humor and entertain its audience.

The video *Cute and Retarded Animals* (2007) was constructed of images and clips of animals doing odd or silly things. Text added to this video stated, “cute first” and “now retarded,” with the first clips showing animals doing cute things, and the later clips showing animals doing silly or funny things. The overall purpose of this video was clearly to provide lighthearted entertainment. In another video, a young man was clearly having fun dancing in a humorous way (*Retarded White Kid Dancing*, 2007). The video was presumably created to entertain those who were recording it and subsequently those who viewed it on YouTube.

A question posted on *Yahoo! Answers* in July, 2009, asks “What’s something retarded/fun to do?” This is an example of the word retarded being used in conjunction with the word fun. This appears to be a new use of the term retarded. The word has strayed from its traditional sense, but unlike the common understanding of the shifting use of the word, it is not explicitly negative or offensive.

Use of Retarded to Insult or Criticize

The term retarded is frequently used in everyday popular culture in the US to criticize or refer to a person or thing in a negative sense. Retarded used in this way puts a negative spin on the word to attribute supposed characteristics of a person with an intellectual disability to a person without such a disability. This was deemed to be the most malicious use of the term identified through this research. When the word retarded was used as an insult or to criticize a person, it was a deliberate and direct attempt to put that person down. This use of the word was evident in a YouTube video in which Tucker Carlson, MSNBC’s senior campaign correspondent, compared Canadians to “your retarded cousin” (*Tucker Carlson Calls Canadians Retarded*, 2006). The word retarded was deliberately used to belittle and insult Canadians.

Other examples of YouTube videos that used the word retarded to criticize or put down others were *Retarded Comedy Time* and *Retarded Moshpit*. In *Retarded Comedy Time* (2007), an individual without an intellectual disability was imitating a person with such a disability in a negative and demeaning way. The performer, a small-time comedian, was acting in this way to elicit humor, but the actual outcome was overtly demeaning and insulting to individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Retarded Moshpit* (2007) featured individuals without visible disabilities

dancing at a concert. The use of the word retarded in this case was being used negatively to insult the individuals by implying that they were not good dancers.

In another video, *Retarded YouTube Users* (2006), a compilation of photos and video clips presented depictions of people with disabilities along with offensive text. Where people without disabilities were shown, the implication was that they were retarded like the other individuals who were featured. In one case, the text that accompanied the image of a person without a visible disability read, “Not retarded, just very, very, creepy.” The images and text in this video were explicit in the negative attitude they expressed towards people with intellectual disabilities.

Term Retarded as a Substitute for Other Words

The word retarded is frequently used as a substitute for other words. It is a word that now “expresses disdain or stupidity, funny or simpleness” (Hoad, 2006). Through the analysis of YouTube videos, it was found that retarded was used in the ways mentioned by Hoad, in addition to some other uses, not all of which were negative. For example, there was a video in which the individual consecutively stated, “That was retarded...that was amazing” to describe an event (Steve Meade-Retarded Knock, 2007). In this situation, the individual was using the terms *retarded* and *amazing* synonymously.

In another video, *The Most Retarded Fergie Video U Will Ever See!* (2007), the creator had filmed her own “music video” using the music of Fergie’s song, Glamorous. Based on the fact that the individual who posted the video seemed to be proud of her creation, the word retarded in the video’s title indicated a positive use. In fact, the words “most retarded” in the title could easily be substituted for “best” without altering the creator’s intent. In *How Retarded Can YOU Get to the 90s??* (2006), the individual featured in the video was reminiscing about, and lip synching to songs from the 1990s in a fun, theatrical way. The term retarded in this case could be substituted for the word “silly” in the title without changing the meaning.

The researchers classified the video *J Retarded Version* (2007) as an altered animation. The music lyrics and text in the video were in Chinese and the researchers were therefore unable to determine the exact use of the term retarded. Information about the user who posted the video to YouTube indicated that he was a 12-year old boy from Taiwan currently attending an Anglo-Chinese school in Singapore. It is significant that despite the fact that the video was made entirely in Chinese, the term retarded was still used in the title. This indicates that the substitution of the word retarded for other words is a phenomenon that has infiltrated English-speaking countries around the world.

Slang use of Retarded in a Hip Hop Context

The term retarded is used in hip hop slang and party vernacular to mean “have fun/go crazy.” Flexner (1975) described this type of word use as a counterword, a word meaning that has expanded to have wider applicability than that of the original referent (as cited in Moore, 2004). The word retarded and the expression “get retarded” with this particular meaning can be found online as early as 2003. In a web-based urban dictionary, the expression “get retarded”

was defined by a user as, “To consume intoxicating alcohol or drugs to the point where you are incapable of verbally communicating past incoherent mumbles. Motor skills are also severely hampered thereby giving the overall impression of severe retardation--‘Let’s go out and get retarded tonight at the bar’” (Urban Dictionary, 2003a). Similarly, the word retarded was defined as, “The act of getting wasted on drink or drugs i.e., being in a retarded state. *Man I drank so much last night I was retarded, and let’s get retarded*” (Urban Dictionary, 2003b). This was the same year that the Black Eyed Peas song, *Let’s Get Retarded* was released. Eighteen of the randomly selected YouTube videos analyzed were based on this hip hop song. The majority of those videos ($n = 16$) consisted of the unaltered Black Eyed Peas song dubbed on to new footage. The diverse nature of these homemade videos indicated that the slang use of the word retarded was not limited to hip hop artists. One video, for example showed young white men dancing to the song while skiing and snowboarding in the French-speaking resort of Ovronnaz, Switzerland (Los Kippos - Let's Get Retarded, 2007).

In another YouTube video, the creator dubbed the Black Eyed Peas song onto video clips of LeBron James, a professional basketball player, making skillful shots (Lebron James-Let’s Get Retarded, 2006). This choice of song could be interpreted as representing James’ great basketball plays. In another instance, the video showed a live Black Eyed Peas performance in Germany (BEP Let’s Get Retarded, 2006). As a prelude to the song, *Let’s Get Retarded*, a member of the band declared to the crowd, “Everybody’s gonna get a little crazy right now, everybody’s gonna get a little loud right now.” These assertions substantiate the slang use of the word retarded to “get crazy” and “have fun” in a hip hop context.

Discussion

On March 2, 2008, it was reported that YouTube was about to reach 75 million videos, up from 70 million one month prior (Sarno, 2008). According to Bucholtz (2000), the rapid transmission of culture, and by extension language, is one of the most obvious consequences of new communication media. The changing use of language on YouTube, and YouTube’s ability to reach global audiences (such as skiers in Switzerland and school boys in Singapore) was apparent from our research.

Of the 100 videos analyzed, approximately half ($n = 48$) used the term retarded in a negative way. This use of the word reflects the way the word is used in mainstream U.S. society. Only 11 of the videos used the term in the traditional sense, meaning that the term was used to describe someone with an intellectual disability. Of the remaining videos ($n = 41$), the word was used in a neutral, positive, or sometimes unidentified way. Using retarded in a positive way is a new application of the word, which appears to have originated in the “club scene” (Urban Dictionary, 2003). While the term was originally adopted with negative connotations, “get retarded” referred to becoming intoxicated and “acting like a retarded person,” the term infused its way into this subculture and eventually came to simply mean “have fun” in a partying context. This transformation of the word followed the usual pattern that words take as they change over time, a pattern that can be illustrated through the current use of the word “lame,” which, although used for things considered substandard, no longer carries with it any suggestion of a physical disability. This situation raises the question of whether using the word retarded in a positive way can ever be innocuous. To date, all disability words that have taken on new meanings have

maintained negative connotations: idiot, moron, dumb, and spastic (spaz) serve as pertinent examples; and disability words are frequently used in everyday language with negative associations, as in the expressions *blindsided*, *crippled by*, and *deaf ears*.

Conclusion

It is not known why the word retarded has also come to be used as a substitution for other words (e.g., silly, funny) without any particular positive or negative connotations. However, the many meanings associated with the word retarded demonstrate the fluidity of language and the particular fluidity of language on YouTube, an arena in which information and knowledge are created. This situation indicates that attempting to create rules about language use may be a futile endeavor.

Many advocates are pushing to change the term mental retardation as a classification category and abandon the “R” word (Retarded) in everyday language in much the same way the “N” word (Nigger) has been abandoned (Felty & Felty, 2007). However, it is widely recognized that the connection between language and attitudes is complex and attitudes cannot be changed with such simple solutions. History indicates that simply changing a term such as retarded will not lead to positive attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities. It is more likely that the word retarded will take on new meanings and the term that is adopted to replace it will in turn carry with it negative connotations. Walsh (2002) aptly stated:

“...The real question about individuals should not be what we are going to ‘call them’ in the future, but whether or not they will continue to be devalued because of certain personal characteristics associated with their development” (p. 72).

Despite education laws in the US mandating education for students with disabilities in the “least restrictive environment,” students with intellectual disabilities continue to be segregated in schools. The least restrictive environment is based on a continuum of settings and is therefore not synonymous with full inclusion; however, there are those who believe that categorical disability determination hinders the full inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities and their segregation could therefore be alleviated by moving federal and state legislation in noncategorical directions (Smith P., 2007).

Other advocates in the US Disability Pride movement have adopted a “disabilities are beautiful” position modeled after the US “Black is Beautiful” movement of the 1960s, and are striving to show society that disabilities are a natural part of life (Triano, 2003). However, many people with intellectual disabilities cannot easily communicate their views (Taylor, 1996), which opens up the question of who should speak for them, particularly with regards to issues such as their empowerment through reappropriation of the term retarded.

While advocates in the US are working to create change around mainstream ideology, YouTube is expanding as a site of rapid cultural change. In 2008, a music video based on “familiar YouTube faces” was added to YouTube (Pork and Beans, 2008). According to YouTube’s Michele Flannery, after this video was posted, “[It shot] up to 500,000 hits in six hours” (Snider, 2008). Another video, *Evolution of Dance* (2006), has been viewed over 92

million times, making it the most viewed video on YouTube. These situations serve as pertinent examples of the influence of YouTube and the role it plays in cultural transmission.

The potential of YouTube videos to reach and influence masses of individuals around the world must be considered with regards to disability terminology. Language can now change more rapidly and spread more globally than at any previous point in history. Consider that with only verbal, print, and other traditional media outlets to transmit the word, it took six centuries for the term idiot to become negative to the point of being abandoned as a means of classifying individuals with intellectual disabilities (Patton, Beirne-Smith, & Payne, 1990; Walsh, 2002). The professional organization, The National Association for Retarded Children, was founded in 1953 and in 1992, the term retarded was removed from the organization's title and it became simply The Arc (2008). In this case, it took almost 40 years for the term retarded to become negatively stigmatized and for the organization to reject its usage.

The rate of change in today's society is rapid when compared to that of the past. Through new communication media such as YouTube, words continue to take on new meanings, and old and new uses now coexist in this online world. YouTube reflects the language of mainstream society in the US, where traditional and negative uses of the term retarded are used; however, it also provides a forum for words to evolve in new ways and in turn, become integrated into mainstream society. Take, for example, the original Black Eyed Peas song, *Let's Get Retarded*, which was changed to *Let's Get it Started* under pressure from The Arc (Johnson, 2004). The Internet became the primary means for airing the song with the word retarded in the title and lyrics. Eighteen percent of the randomly selected YouTube videos analyzed in this study featured this song, a statistic that serves to further illustrate the astounding impact of YouTube culture.

Despite this historic trend, the current situation that now exists--multiple-meaning, coexisting uses of a disability word--is unprecedented and cannot be compared to the straightforward transformation of disability classification terms in the past. The YouTube culture in which the word *retarded* is being used and redefined is both osmotic and borderless. Only time will tell what the consequences will be for those for whom the term was originally intended.

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