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The Gender Differences in Perceived Obscenity of Vulgar, Profane and Derogatory - Language Usage among U.S. University Students

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Reviewed by Dr. Carrie Smith
Assistant Professor of Psychology

Abstract

With the Access Hollywood video of Donald Trump and the “This Pussy Fights Back” response by women, societal standards toward gender-specific language and appropriate conversation topics have become center-stage in our society. The concept that “boys will be boys” normalize vulgar conversations between men, whereas women who “swear like sailors” are seen by society as unprofessional, to have bad manners, limited vocabulary and to be seeking attention or “trying to be like one of the boys”. Such stigmas, although aim to make the perspectives of so-called “unladylike” women obsolete and invisible, may actually end up doing the complete opposite by attracting more attention. That attention, however, often translates into shock; not an actual understanding of her argument. On the flip side, when men use profanity or speak of vulgar topics, no one is outraged because it’s just “locker room talk”.

Through quantitative data acquired from surveying over 400 students, and qualitative data acquired from interviews with ten students, this paper will examine the disparities between what is considered taboo discussion subjects and language for males and females. The perceptual survey asked students to rate the level of obscenity of various words and phrases and whether such a level is affected by a male or female speaker.

Background

English-speaking men and women are increasingly using vulgarity (explicit and offensive references to sex or bodily functions), profanity (“swear words”) and derogatory language (terms used to insult others) in a range of private and public settings.

Objective

To examine gender differences in frequency, acceptability and motivation of vulgarity, profanity and derogatory language usage among U.S. university students.

Methods

A perceptual survey of U.S. university students (n=409) and oral interviews (n=10) of U.S. university students is used to examine gender differences in frequency, acceptability and motivation of vulgarity and profanity usage.

Results

While gender differences in the frequency and motivation of vulgarity and profanity usage were small, all participants considered instances of speakers using female-descriptive derogatory terms to be much obscener than instances of speakers using male-descriptive derogatory terms. For example, a woman calling another woman a ‘cunt’ was considered 6x obscener than a man calling another man an ‘asshole.’

Conclusions

Perceptions that female-descriptive derogatory terms are significantly obscener than male-descriptive derogatory terms suggest that the English language represents a culture of misogyny and sexism. Female-descriptive derogatory terms, such as ‘whore’ and ‘slut,’ also refer to sexuality, whereas male-descriptive derogatory terms, such as ‘dick’ and ‘douche,’ refer to character, which suggests that female promiscuity is considered obscene.

Introduction

There has been a general increase in the use of profanity ("swear words") by English speakers in public and private settings (IPSOS, 2006). A study of 1,001 adults found that 74% frequently or occasionally use profanity in public, and 67% are a lot or somewhat bothered by others’ profanity usage (IPSOS, 2006). In broadcasting media, 9 out of 10 programs contained at least one obscenity, and most television programs contain risqué language approximately once every five minutes (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004, 2009). And with the Access Hollywood tape of Donald Trump, debate has sparked over the acceptability of “locker-room talk” (NY Times, 2016). In response to Trump’s remark, “Grab ‘em by the pussy,” the rally cry of “This pussy grabs back” emerged for female rage and gained popularity at the 2017 Women’s March (The Guardian, 2016).

The role and implications of gender in profanity usage has been heavily researched (Johnson & Lewis, 2010). Men have been found to generally use stronger profanities and women to use milder ones (Lakoff, 1973). According to Lakoff (1973), there is a double standard in vulgar language usage, with women being scrutinized more. In the following decades, more researchers found support for Lakoff’s conclusions (Rasmussen & Moley, 1986 and de Klerk 1991). Selnow (1985) also found that females perceive profanity-usage as less appropriate in a range of settings, except in mixed-gender interactions.

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However, as gender roles change, females’ profanity usage and perception are changing as well – with less differences between genders in perception of obscenity usage (Johnson & Lewis, 2010). Even studies from over twenty years ago show that American and South African women were using derogatory language in increasing numbers and in frequencies equivalent to men (Risch 1987, de Klerk 1992). Within an Irish pub community, little difference was found between the men and women’s “everyday” profanity usage (Stapleton, 2003). Stapleton (2003), however, also found that men believed that certain profane words, especially words to describe female anatomy, are more acceptable for male speakers. Braun & Kitzinger (2001) also found that males are able to list significantly more genitalia terms than females.

Using a large dataset of U.S. college students, this study will examine whether there is evidence for a double standard in the acceptability of vulgarity (explicit and offensive references to sex or bodily functions), profanity (“swear words”) and derogatory language (terms used to insult others) usage. This study will also build upon previous research regarding gender differences in the frequency and motivation of vulgarity, profanity and derogatory language usage.

In addition, this study attempted to explore how U.S. college students understand “locker-room talk” and the resultant backlash against Trump’s comments in the form of the “this pussy grabs back” rallying cry. The survey, however, only include one question on this topic, which is null because it assumed that participants knew what the phrase referred to.

It was expected that results would follow trends from previous research; with women who use vulgarity, profanity and derogatory language to face more scrutiny, and women who use vulgarity, profanity and derogatory language usage.

In regard to the obscenity of different speaker contexts, it is expected that situations in which men use derogatory terms to describe females will be perceived as the obscene.

In regard to gender differences of motivations behind obscene-language usage, it was expected that the results would match Stapleton’s (2003) findings, with females cursing in order to show intimacy/trust and males in order to fit into gender norms and out of habit. It was also expected that both genders would curse more around their own gender, and that “f**k” and “cunt” would be the most avoided words and that “fuck” would be the most frequently used word.

Methods

In this study, a Google Forms survey was used that recycled some questions from Stapleton’s (2003) questionnaire. Participants were selected through convenience sampling from the University of Mississippi and Ohio State University in group messages, social media and class email lists. Participants were asked to “take part in a linguistic study on profanity.” Student participant responses totaled 409: 286 (70.1%) of which were female and 122 (29.9%) of which were male. The grade levels of responders were relatively even with 30.8% freshmen, 24.4% sophomores, 18.6% juniors and 26.2% seniors. 54.8% of responders were OSU students and 45.2% were UM students.

A copy of the survey is located in the Appendix. Questions were all multiple choice, check-all-that-apply or fill-in-the-blank. Participants were asked why they curse, who they curse in front of and the curse words that they refrain from using and the curse word that they use most frequently.

Participants were also asked to judge the obscenity of vulgarity, profanity and derogatory language-use in a range of contexts. Participants were provided with two sets of 12 situations, totaling to 24 situations. The first set of 12 include situations with only male speakers, 5 of these male situations comprise of a male speaker using a derogatory and/or vulgar term to describe a female, 3 comprise of a male speaker using a derogatory and/or vulgar term to describe another male, and 4 comprise of a male speaker using profanity for other purposes, such as anger and exclamation, not directed at another person. The second set of 12 include situations with only female speakers. 5 of these female situations comprise of a female speaker using a derogatory and/or vulgar term to describe a male, 3 comprise of a female speaker using a derogatory and/or vulgar term to describe another female, and 4 comprise of a female speaker using profanity for other purposes, such as anger and exclamation, that is not directed at another person. A flaw in the survey was that the male and female situations were not counterbalanced. Participants responded to the 12 male speaker situations first and then the 12 female situations.

Participants were also asked, “are certain curse words more acceptable for men than for women?” A flaw in the survey was that participants were not asked if there are certain curse words that are more acceptable for women than for men.

And finally, participants were given the option of doing a follow-up interview in which they were asked to explain each of their answers further. 69 (17.2%) of respondents were interested in doing the one-on-one interview, but ultimately only 10 ended up being interviewed: 4 males and 6 females. In the 10 follow-up interviews, which took about 15-20 minutes, the participants were asked to elaborate on each of their survey answers.

Results

Data is rounded to 0 decimal points for simplicity.

Figure 1: Percentages of males and females who use profanity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males [%]</th>
<th>Females [%]</th>
<th>Total [%]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Percentages of males and females who curse more around the same gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males [%]</th>
<th>Females [%]</th>
<th>Total [%]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Gender differences in reasons to curse (n=409)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vulgarity</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profanity</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derogatory</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

Figure 1 shows that the large majority, 94%, of students in this study use profanity and both genders use profanity equally and for similar reasons, which correlates with previous research (Kerk, 1992). Males and females in the study mainly reported using profanity for the same reasons: humor/story-telling, to create emphasis, anger/tension-release and habit (Figure 3). The second survey question “do you curse more around the same gender?” is problematic because if a respondent answers “no,” it is unclear whether or not they curse more around the opposite gender or because they curse equally in front of men and women. More nuance could be added to this question in a future survey. Data represented in Figure 2 shows that males in the study are nearly twice as more likely to curse around the same gender than females, which actually goes against Stapleton’s findings that women are more likely to use cursing to show intimacy/trust with other women, whereas men are not. The fact that only 32% of women said they curse more around other females is surprising and greatly contradicts Stapleton’s findings that females use cursing for solidarity purposes and intimacy. A few female interviewees said that the gender wasn’t as important as comfort level. A flaw in this data collection was the phrasing “to show intimacy/trust” because in a follow-up interview with a female, she said she had no clue why someone would use profanity in an “intimate” setting. She thought “intimacy/trust” meant sexual/romantic intimacy, which is not what was intended. It would have been better to instead write, “to show comfort level/trust.”

Figure 5 shows that there are no major differences between the genders in regard to which male-speaker situations are obscene. Everyone agreed, by a large majority, that “a male saying that a girl has big tits in front of his college professor” is the obscene. Everyone agreed, by a large majority, that “a female saying that a male has a big cock in front of his college professor” is the obscene, which shows that the variable of social setting has a strong impact on perceptions of obscenity. In a follow-up interview, a male said that he thought the “big cock” situation simply sounded “ridiculous” and didn’t think anyone would ever actually say that. Changing the word from “cock” to “dick” might have altered the results because “cock” is less common in American vernacular. It would also be interesting to duplicate these phrases in a more private setting and examine obscenity perceptions to isolate the words from the social setting. “A female, during a lecture class, calling another female a bitch” is the second most obscene, once again due to the public context. A male interviewee said, “that’s private stuff that you should solve on your own, not bring to the lecture hall.” Despite the context, it was still surprising to see a situation with the word “bitch” so high on the obscenity chart because many interviewees felt that “bitch” has been reclaimed by women and is thus not as obscene as “whore” or “cunt.” If the context were more informal, perhaps a female calling another female a bitch would not be considered quite as obscene.

Figure 6 shows that males and females in this study were, for the most part, in agreement about which male-speaker situations are obscene, with the exception of “a female saying she ‘has to take a piss’ in front of her friend’s parents.” Males ranked “a female saying she ‘has to take a piss’ in front of her friend’s parents” as the third most obscene female situation, whereas females ranked it as the fifth. A female interviewee said that her parents would be a bit surprised if she said she had to take a piss, whereas if her brother said it, they wouldn’t find it unusual. “Taking a piss” is a male phrase, she said, because it sounds very vulgar and masculine. This comment is interesting because it suggests that vulgarity is associated with masculinity. Males think a female say-
using derogatory terms to insult women is extremely obscene. A male interviewee said, “you should treat women with more respect than guys.” A female calling another female a bitch is 1.5x as obscene as a male calling another male a dick. Many of the interviewees said that they thought “bitch” has been reclaimed by females and is now on the same level as dick or asshole. Yet, the quantitative results would suggest otherwise. According to the data collected in this study, “bitch” is becoming less obscene than “whore” or “cunt,” which suggests that reclaiming the term is removing the stigma. One female interviewee, however, said that theoretically females could reclaim all of the derogatory terms used to describe them, but consider- ing the current social climate, another word will just pop up — or perhaps, another mean- ing will come around. One male interviewee saw the curse word he uses most frequent- ly is “bitch” because he calls his guy friends bitches all of the time — he said he’s only ever called a girl a bitch maybe once. An example of when he’d call his friend a bitch is if he tells his guy friend to open a beer and then he doesn’t want to drink it. So, although, females have, in a way, reclaimed the word “bitch,” a new meaning related to weakness may have developed.

The qualitative data supported quan- titative results: male-de- scriptive derogatory terms are obscene than male-de- scriptive derogatory terms. A female said, “dick is more of a joke and it’s in the context you take it as seriously because the way society views the world, for guys it’s about conquests whereas “whore” and “cunt” are sexist because you’re reducing her to a sexual object. Another male said that a guy can insult a girl in more severe ways than a guy can insult a guy. A female interviewee said even if peo- ple were to use terms such as “manwhore,” “womansizer” and “f**ckboy” more frequently to describe male sexuality, “a guy can’t take it as seriously because the way society views the world, for guys it’s about conquests but for girls the more they sleep around, the more they’re considered ‘used.’”

Figure 10 shows that “f**k” is the most frequently-used word in the data-set, which may be due to its versatility since it can be used as noun, adjective and verb. Figures 11 and 12 show that females use “shit” more and “f**k” less than males. A fe- male interviewee said she uses shit because it’s “not as intense as f**k and it’s more so- cially acceptable.” Figure 13 shows that both genders reported avoiding using the term “fag,” which suggests an aversion to insult- ing gay people. “Cunt” is the second most avoided because as mentioned earlier, it is considered the obscene curse word. Figure 13 also shows that higher percent- ages of females refrain from all words; especial- ly, “c**k,” “f**cks,” “prick.” Also, more females avoid using the word “pr**zy” than males, supporting previous research that males use profane words that describe female body parts than females. Figure 14 shows that the majority of partici- pants did not think certain curse words were more acceptable for men than women which is not what was hypothesized. This finding, however, may hint at progress toward gen- der equality in profanity and vulgarity usage. Males considered “f**k” far more accept- able while females considered “p**z,” “slut” and “whore” more acceptable. The fact that males think it’s more acceptable for males to say “f**k” may suggest that cursing is
an expression of toughness and masculinity. Females thought it is more acceptable for males to say “pussy,” “slut” and “whore,” which supports previous research (Stapleton, 2003).

Conclusion

This study found that male and female perceptions of vulgarity and obscenity are not as different as expected. The U.S. college students in the study largely agreed upon reasons to curse, levels of obscenity of various situations, the most frequently used curse word, curse words to refrain from using and the fact that there are not curse words that are more acceptable for men than women. Males and females in this study have similar perceptions of what is obscene and what is not – the only major difference is that 19% more females than males thought a female calling another female a whore was obscene. Perhaps, this suggests that since males are not frequently referred to as whore or cunt, they are not as familiar with the degradation of these derogatory terms as females are.

The most significant finding was the contrast between perceived obscenity of female-descriptive derogatory terms and male-descriptive derogatory terms. When situations were duplicated with identical social contexts and similar derogatory terms used, situation in which the speaker was calling another female a whore was obscene. Perhaps, this suggests that since males are not frequently referred to as whore or cunt, they are not as familiar with the degradation of these derogatory terms as females are.

Future studies could seek to isolate the specific curse word from the social (public or private) context. It is difficult to know if respondents were making their decisions based on the social context or actual curse word; however, it is also essentially impossible to get rid of the context because it is too open-ended to ask if “a female saying fuck” is obscene or not. One male interviewee said that he never takes profanity to an extreme level where he actually has to monitor himself, except when drunk. Perhaps adding the variable of alcohol could produce differing results, because intoxicated speech is less inhibited.

References


Appendix

Profanity Survey Script

This is research for my presentation at the Sarah ISOM Center’s 17th Annual Gender Conference.

*Required

(Q1) Are you male or female? *
- Male
- Female

(Q2) What grade are you in? *
- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

(Q3) Where do you go to college? *
- University of Mississippi
- Ohio State University

(Q4) What is your hometown? (please write city and state) *

(Q5) Do you use profanity? *
- Yes
- No

(Q6) If answered yes to last question, why do you curse? (select all reasons that apply to you)
- Humor/story-telling
- To create emphasis
- Anger/Tension-release
- Habit
- It’s normal/expected in college
- To show intimacy/trust
- To cover fear/vulnerability
- Part of personality

(Q7) Do you curse more around people of the same gender as yourself? *
- Yes
- No

(Q8) Is the phrase “This Pussy Grabs Back” obscene? *
- Yes
- No

(Q9) Are there any curse words you try to refrain from using? (check all that apply and if you refrain from words not on the list, please write in the last option)
- Shit
- Fuck
- Damn
- Bitch
- Crap
- Piss
- Dick
- Cock
- Pussy
- Asshole
- Fag
- Bastard
- Slut
- Douche
- Cunt
- Whore
- Tits
- Ass
- Hell
- Prick
- Other:

(Q10) Which curse word do you use most frequently? (If you don’t curse, leave blank)

(Q11) Check which situations are obscene. *
- A Male telling his male friend in private that a female they know is a cunt
- A male telling a group of male friends that a male they know is an asshole
- A male telling his girlfriend in private that she’s a whore
- A male telling a group of male friends in private that he’s “going to get pussy” that night
- A male telling his male and female friends at the dining hall that a girl is a slut
- A male at a party telling another male that he’s a dick
- A male, during a lecture class with 50+ students, audibly call another male a douche
- A male saying that a girl has big tits in front of his college professor
- A male saying he has to “take a piss” in front of his friend’s parents
- A male saying “hell” in front of his parents
- A male walking down the street, tripping and exclaiming “fuck” loud enough for those around him to hear
- A male saying “crap” in front of your university’s chancellor

(Q13) Are certain curse words more acceptable for men than for women? *
- Yes
- No

(Q14) If you answered yes to the last question, which words are more acceptable?

(Q15) Would you be interested in doing a more in-depth one-on-one interview? *
- Yes
- No

(Q16) If you answered yes to the last question, what is your e-mail address?