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# Perception of Profanity in Interpersonal Relationships

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*Ashley Pivaronas, Jessica Benham, and Stephanie Melhaff*

Swearing is a form of language commonly used, yet its use is oftentimes viewed negatively in certain contexts (Johnson & Lewis, 2010). Swearing is an interesting form of expression because it is not a behavior typically taught or encouraged by authority figures (Thelwall, 2008). Hamilton (1989) emphasized the importance of examining the influence of perception of profanity usage by the receiver of the profanity, noting that perceived obscenity can differ from person to person. This study examined how gender and political orientation influence perception of profanity usage. Relationship to the user of the expletive, as well as the specific expletive used, were evaluated as factors in perception as well.

## **Rationale**

The use of profanity in an interpersonal setting is worthy studying because it impacts how people perceive others in interpersonal relationships. For instance, Johnson and Lewis (2010) stated that swearing is a form of language that has interested scholars because it is commonly used, yet note that the effects are understudied due to a focus on “reasons for swearing or descriptions of swearing in television programming” (p. 107). Since it is so common, the use of profanity is something nearly everyone has experienced and been affected by.

The effects of swearing can be interpersonal and depend upon the action and reaction of people, which is at the core of communication research. Words are used to communicate meaning; coordination of meaning requires that insight is gained into how others perceive words, because others never fully know how the message is received without feedback. In this study, feedback will be gathered to explore the effects of profane language, specifically when it comes to the relationship between gender, status, political orientation, and swearing.

## **Literature Review**

Perception of profanity has been an area heavily studied by communication scholars, who have come to various conclusions about the role of gender, age, education, social norms, status, context, and power in determining the offensiveness of a given word. The existing literature has tended to focus especially on gender differences, with an emphasis on surveying college students and categorizing words by intensity or offensiveness. Thus, the literature categorizes types of expletives, characterizes differences in perception, places the expletives in context, and provides methods by which to evaluate expletive use.

*Definitions*

In order to begin this study, an overall definition of profanity was needed in order for specific words used by people to be denoted as expletives. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) defined swearing as “the use of taboo language with the purpose of expressing the speaker’s emotional state and communicating that information to listeners” (p. 268). They proposed that profanity can either be planned or unplanned. If it was planned, it was not necessarily offensive; the context and use of the profanity determined whether it was impolite or polite. If it was unplanned, it was a result of an uncensored emotional response and the effect was also not always negative; the level of offensiveness may have been unintentional on the part of the sender, though it was often not perceived that way by the receiver.

Thelwall (2008) defined swearing as “the use of any word or phrase that is likely to cause offense when used in middle class polite conversation,” and notes that these words and phrases shift over time due to cultural changes (p. 85). Expletives, according to De Klerk (1991), are words that “belong in the area of linguistic taboo...focus is typically sex and excretion...and anything that has a sacred place” (p. 157). Thus, Thelwall (2008) noted the correlation between swearing and offensiveness, while De Klerk (1991) identified that swearing is a social taboo. Both articles point to the fact that swearing has been viewed as a restricted social custom, as it should not be used in polite conversation and is viewed most negatively when used by females.

Sapolsky, Shafer & Kaye (2011) and Sapolsky and Kaye (2005) were the authors of a word designation outline that divided profane words into specific categories, which many articles thereafter have used to define profanity. The outline contained words that were to be considered expletives and what category the expletive would fall into. This made it easier to study profanity, since researchers could designate specific categories and ensure no confusion around which words were profane and which were not. Here is a synopsis of the words that were considered offensive, and what category the words fell into:

Seven Dirty Words: cocksucker, cunt, fuck, motherfucker, piss, shit, tits

Sexual Words: pussy, dick

Excretory Words: shithead, asshole, douchebag

Strong Words: whore, bastard, bitch, son of a bitch

Mild Words: God/Lord, Christ/Jesus Christ, slut, goddamn (Sapolsky et al., 2011, pp. 55, 54).

Thelwall (2008) referred to 15 different categories of swearwords. These include:

Predicative negative adjective: *the film is shit*

Adverbial booster: *fucking marvellous*

Cursing expletive: *fuck you!*

Destinational usage: *fuck off!*

Emphatic adverb/adjective: *he fucking did it*

Figurative extension of literal meaning: *to fuck about*

General expletive: *oh fuck!*

Idiomatic set phrase: *fuck all*

Literal usage denoting taboo referent: *we fucked*

Imagery based on literal meaning: *kick the shit out of*

Premodifying intensifying negative adjective: *the fucking idiot*

Pronominal form with undefined referent: *got shit to do*

Personal: Personal insult referring to defined entity: *you fuck!*

Reclaimed usage with no negative intent: *niggaz* as used by black rappers

Religious oath used for emphasis: *by God* (p. 87).

Thelwall (2008) selected specific swear words and categorizes them based on BBC guidelines, which label three strengths of swearwords, and the US “dirty words” list. He also looks to the formation, purpose, strength, spellings and implicit use of swearing as important categories for research.

The categories developed by Thelwall (2008) were focused more on the grammatical usage of the expletives, while those created by Sapolsky et al. (2011) and Sapolsky and Kaye (2005) grouped the words based on similar meanings or strength ratings of the word.

### *Gender Differences*

Much scholarly activity has occurred within the realm of gender differences in expletive use and perception, regardless of whether this was the original focus of the research. This was due to the fact that almost every study involved both men and women, and trends that were drawn within the results of the findings with both men and women were too significant to ignore. For instance, in Bostrom, Baseheart, & Rossiter (1973), the researchers were studying the effect of profanity on persuasiveness, and in the end, they found gender to have a “significant effect” (p. 469) on the ability of the speaker to persuade others, including it in their results sections though it was not a part of the original hypothesis.

Most articles that studied the relationship between gender and profanity found that it is widely expected that women not use profanity, meaning that males who use profanity were generally seen as more socially acceptable than females (Bostrom et al., 1973; Cohen & Saine, 1977; De Klerk, 1991; Hamilton, 1989; Howell & Giuliao, 2011; Sapolsky et al., 2011; Thelwall, 2008). Hamilton (1989) also found that gender differences played a big role in perceived lewdness, competence, trustworthiness, sociability, pleasantness, and politeness. Both men and women were perceived negatively in those five categories if they used profanity, but women experienced a more negative response than men in those categories if they swore.

Cohen and Saine (1977) conducted a study in which they examined “the effects of profanity on observer judgments of a speaker’s character,” with special regard to gender difference (p. 45). Their study found that a speaker’s use of profanity resulted in an increase in negative perceptions of the speaker, but that members of one gender viewed members of the opposite gender less negatively than those of the same gender (Cohen & Saine, 1977). Females, according to the research, tend to be more offended by use of explicit language than males. Sapolsky et al. (2011) found that female participants were more likely to find words significantly offensive than male participants. Howell and Giuliao (2011) found a similar result, discovering that men who swear at women are judged more harshly by participants than women swearing at women or men swearing at men. Another interesting finding cited by Howell and Giuliao (2011) was that men overall were less offended by swearing in general than women were.

Research also finds that males tend to use stronger language than females. For instance, Thelwall (2008) examined expletive use by male and female adolescents and found that, in both the UK and the US, males used “significantly more moderate and very strong language” than females did (p. 96). The study also found that specific words were used more often by either gender. In the UK, *fuck*, *cunt*, and *ass* were used more commonly by males. In the US, *whore* and *slut* were used more often by females, while *fuck* and *nigga* are significantly associated with males.

De Klerk (1991) tied the gender difference in profanity usage to social power, since women do not tend to enjoy positions of power within the South African society that the study analyzed. This study also found that males used stronger expletives than females, but noted that variables of age and education, which are also variables of social power, positively impacted levels of expletive usage.

On the other hand, Johnson and Lewis (2010), in their research on profanity in the workplace, found an interesting lack of a relationship between swearing and speaker sex. They conclude that it is possible that sex differences are changing over time, as it is becoming more socially acceptable for females to swear.

Also related to social power, a widespread intentional bias towards feminism has begun to develop with regard to swearing, causing people to view women who swear less negatively (Hamilton, 2003). This means that women who are in favor of equality between the sexes, and are aware of the fact that women are viewed more negatively than men are when they swear, intentionally try to swear more to acclimate society towards this phenomenon. In other words, they try to take society’s thought captive, and reform it.

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Sapolsky et al. (2011) found that conservatives tend to rate explicit language as more offensive than liberals do. There was little mention of political orientation in other literature about expletive usage.

### *Speaker Relationship Differences*

De Klerk (1991) noted that teenagers view expletive use by adults to be most inappropriate and argued that this might be due to the teenage desire to rebel against social norms. Thelwall (2008) also examined the influence of authority figures or adults and finds swearing an interesting form of expression because it not a behavior that is typically taught or encouraged by authority figures.

Another common theme was the difference in perception that occurs between employee and employer when expletives are used. Johnson and Lewis (2010) found that the use of profanity by a superior was seen as both surprising and as a sign of incompetence, noting that this appeared to be caused by the formal context of the interaction. In a casual, social gathering, the negative perceptions were much lower, meaning participants expected and accepted the use of profanity in a non-professional setting.

The coach-athlete relationship is another example of the impact of authority on perception of profanity. Howell and Giuliao (2011) studied the effects of swearing in a coaching context. They found that swearing overall was viewed negatively in a coaching context, and advised coaches to steer away from it, especially within the context of giving criticism. They also found that use of profanity does not increase the effectiveness of a coach's speech in any way. This was because swearing was viewed to make even the most neutral tones negative (Howell & Giuliao, 2011).

### *Age and Status Differences*

De Klerk (1991) examined the role that status, which the study defined as social power, plays in use of expletives by examining expletive use by teenagers. Older students generally used stronger expletives than younger students did, while those who had attended a private school used stronger expletives than those who had gone to a public school. De Klerk (1991) concluded that all three variables – sex, age, and education – have an impact on social power, and therefore, on the use of expletives. Male adolescents have an easier time breaking social norms than female adolescents, meaning that it might be more accepted for male adolescents to push the boundaries on expletive usage.

### *Contextualizing Use of Expletives*

**Physical Location.** Johnson and Lewis (2010) conducted research about the perception of swearing at the workplace. Johnson and Lewis (2010) had desired to do additional research regarding the location of the expletive use because they did not see adequate existing research within an interpersonal setting and felt that past studies had not taken the context of expletive use into account.

Jay and Janschewitz (2008) researched the contextual elements of speaker, location and type of word. They found that “it is more appropriate for a dean to swear in the office than it is to swear anywhere else on campus. Conversely it is very inappropriate for a student to swear in a dean's office while it is entirely appropriate in a dorm room” (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008, p. 283).

**Media.** Thelwall (2008) examined the use of profanity by middle and high school students on their personal MySpace pages. This was in an attempt to determine if there was a gender difference in use of profanity on the Internet. Context was important because use of profanity in an online setting could or could not be more acceptable than in an in-person setting.

Another study notes that “warning labels, bleeping, and gender” have an impact on how viewers perceive the show and characters when profanity is present (Krcmar & Sohn, 2004, p. 570). Kaye and Sapolsky have done a series of studies in the media profanity realm and found that ratings in general do not accurately reflect the program content any longer. Kaye and Sapolsky (2001) found that the ratings used on primetime television shows such as TV-PG, TV-G, or TV-L, were no longer accurate or up to date. What was once rated as PG should have been considered TV-14 due to the program being more laced with profanities than before; the researchers found that the same level of profanities used in a TV-

14 show were the same as a TV-PG program. Then, in 2004, Kaye and Sapolsky found that there was a sizeable increase in the use of profanity in the 21st century than previously documented in their 1997 study.

Their findings also supported the fact that more profanity was used specifically in the first hour of primetime television, which is the hour that children and young adults watch the most. Human beings in an impressionable age group such as children and young adults will likely mirror what they see on TV. With this research, it can reasonably be concluded that if children are hearing more profanity on TV, which Kaye & Sapolsky's study proved, they will be more likely to swear in general.

Finally, in 2011, Sapolsky et al. conducted further research in their program, justifying their work by noting that the use of expletives on television has been continuing to increase. In this study, the authors specifically focus on the idea that time plays an important role in determining context, noting that the offensiveness of words changes over time.

**Interpersonal Conflict.** The purpose of Young's (2004) study was to examine the use of profanity during situations of interpersonal conflict. She especially drew attention to the importance of attribution theory, noting that the assumptions that a person makes about the other person's intent during a conflict situation can impact the relationship. This led Young (2004) to examine the importance of perception of intent of profanity to conflict situations, since profane language, she notes, is commonly employed in such scenarios.

### **Need for Further Research**

Based on the literature review, clear areas of research within perception of profanity emerged: gender, status, and political orientation. Because the existing literature disagreed on the relationship between gender, status, and profanity usage, further research is necessary in these areas. Additionally, the research on the relationship between political orientation and expletive use was sparse. Thus, this study seeks to fill in these gaps and provide further analysis about these relationships.

### **Method**

#### *Hypotheses and Research Question*

The areas of research mentioned above led to the following hypotheses and research question.

**Hypothesis 1.** Females will view each expletive as more offensive than males.

This hypothesis was tested by asking participants to disclose their gender. Gender was compared with the ratings of expletives using an independent samples T-test.

**Hypothesis 2.** College students will judge authority figures more negatively than their peers for use of profane language.

This hypothesis was tested by asking participants to provide ratings of offensiveness on a Likert-type scale for categories of authority figures and peers. The ratings on words when used by each category of person were added together to form a single value for overall perception of usage by that category of person. A paired-samples t-test was run to compare the difference in perception of profanity usage between college students and parents, college students and professors, and college students and bosses.

**RQ.** Will there be a significant difference in how political conservatives and political liberals view each expletive?

There is very little existing scholarly literature on the issue. It was tested by asking participants to disclose political orientation via the Likert-type scale established by the ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior, which classified participants into the following groups: extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate, slightly conservative, conservative, extremely conservative, haven't thought much about it. A One-Way ANOVA was run to identify any significant difference in perception by the



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groups. Participants who answered that they “haven’t thought much about” their political orientation were removed from the results for two reasons. First, because this was not a category tested by the research question and second, because the ANOVA would have coded these participants as even more extreme than “extremely conservative” because of the relative position of the categories on the Likert-type scale used.

### *Population and Survey*

Three hundred students from a Midwestern university were quasi-randomly selected by culling email addresses alphabetically from the student directory, adjusting for gender and year in school by selecting an equal number of males and females, freshmen-seniors, to receive an email invitation to complete a survey online (n=81 who opened the survey, 67 who completed). This reflects the fact that much of the existing literature involved surveying undergraduate students (Hamilton, 1989; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Johnson & Lewis, 2010; Sapolsky, et al., 2011; Young, 2004). Participants were asked if English was their native language; those who answered “no” were removed from the survey, due to the potential for language barriers to influence perception of the expletives (De Klerk, 1991; Jay & Janschewitz 2008; Sapolsky, et al., 2011).

Expletives were categorized as follows according to the standards established by Sapolsky et al. (2011) and Sapolsky & Kaye (2005):

Seven Dirty words: cocksucker, cunt, fuck, motherfucker, piss, shit, tits

Sexual words: pussy, dick

Excretory words: shithead, asshole, douchebag

Strong words: whore, bastard, bitch, son of a bitch

Mild words: God/Lord, Christ/Jesus Christ, slut, goddamn

The rating scales for the expletives were adapted from the survey created by Sapolsky et al. (2011). Participants who chose to complete this survey were asked to rate the offensiveness of a specific profane word when used by a specific category of person on a Likert-type scale of 1 to 7. One was not offensive at all, seven was highly offensive. The types of people those within the study rated were college students, employers, parents, and professors. College students were considered peers of the participants, while the other three groups were considered authority figures.

On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being not at all offensive and 7 being extremely offensive, how would you rate the following words when used by each person?

"shit"	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
College Student	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Professor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Boss	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 1. Sample survey question. This figure illustrates the rating scale and categories used in the survey.

## Results

### *Hypothesis 1*

**Hypothesis 1.** Females will view each expletive as more offensive than males.

There was not a significant difference ( $p > .05$ ) in perception between females and males of any of the expletives when used by any of the categories of people.

## *Hypothesis 2*

**Hypothesis 2.** College students will judge authority figures more negatively than their peers for use of profane language.

Hypothesis 2 was significantly confirmed by the study, as college students judged parents, professors, and bosses more negatively than their peers for use of profane language.

**Hypothesis 2a.** College students will judge parents more negatively than their peers for use of profane language.

There was a significant difference ( $t(61)=-8.961, p<.001$ ) between how college students viewed use of profanity by parents ( $M=103.22$ ) and by peers ( $M=84.85$ ).

**Hypothesis 2b.** College students will judge professors more negatively than their peers for use of profane language.

There was a significant difference ( $t(61)=-9.284, p<.001$ ) between how college students viewed use of profanity by professors ( $M=109.27$ ) and by peers ( $M=84.39$ ).

**Hypothesis 2c.** College students will judge bosses more negatively than their peers for use of profane language.

There was a significant difference ( $t(61)=-9.435, p<.001$ ) between how college students viewed use of profanity by bosses ( $M=106.71$ ) and by peers ( $M=84.89$ ).

## *Research Question*

**RQ.** Will there be a significant difference in how political conservatives and political liberals view each expletive?

There was no significant difference ( $p >.05$ ) between political conservatives and political liberals in any of the interpersonal contexts. ( $n=48$  conservatives, 13 moderates, 13 liberals, 7 who hadn't thought about it or declined to state).

## **Discussion**

### *Hypothesis 1*

This study, which finds a lack of significant difference in perception of profanity between males and females, contradicts much previously conducted scholarly research (Cohen & Saine, 1997; Howell & Guiliao, 2011; Sapolsky et al., 2011). It does, however, coincide with research conducted by Johnson and Lewis (2010) and Stapleton (2003), which also found no relationship between gender and swearing.

A potential reason for this difference is that gender differences are changing over time; as it becomes more acceptable for females to swear, negative perception of expletive-use by females decreases. This could also be tied to the issue of social power; as feminists attempt to intentionally shift societal attitudes toward expletive-use, female perception of profanity also shifts (Hamilton, 2003).

A limitation of this study was a significant lack of males who participated; there were over twice as many females who took the survey as males, which could have potentially impacted the results.

### *Hypothesis 2*

The findings related to Hypothesis 2 are consistent with the literature. It extends De Klerk's (1991) study, which noted that teenagers view expletive use by adults to be most inappropriate, by also finding that college students view the use of expletives by those older or in authority as most inappropriate. Results support the findings of Johnson and Lewis (2010) by showing that use of profanity by a boss is viewed negatively. The study also expands on the previous literature by showing that profanity usage by



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parents and professors is also viewed negatively, as none of the literature we examined looked specifically to the parent-child relationship or to the professor-student relationship. Howell and Giuliao (2011) examined the coach-athlete relationship, which relate to the present results on perception of professor usage of profanity because of their finding that coaches' use of profanity is viewed negatively, as both are teacher-student relationships. Both coaches and professors tend to encourage students to achieve and to reach goals; the use of profanity in such situations would most likely be viewed similarly due to the similar contexts.

A reason why college students might view use of profanity by authority figures as negative is that it violates what they perceive to be the social norms (DeKlerk, 1991). Thelwall (2008) notes that teenagers do not expect adults to legitimize profanity usage; the same assumption could quite possibly be true of college students. Johnson and Lewis (2010) emphasize the importance of prior expectations in formation of opinions about profanity usage. The use of profanity by an authority figure might therefore violate a college student's expectations for language use.

A limitation of the research within this hypothesis is that the survey did not specify the context in which the authority figures were using profanity. Because perception of profanity most certainly depends on the context in which it is used, this does restrict the conclusions that can be drawn within this portion of the study.

### *Research Question*

A substantial limitation with regard to the research question is that a majority of those who took the survey were conservative. In fact, the number of political liberals is not even statistically significant. Thus, while this study contradicts the findings of Sapolsky et al. (2011), this is quite possibly due to the sample size and population.

### *Survey Completion*

81 of the members of the survey population opened the survey. Of those, 13 exited the survey upon seeing the first word, "cocksucker." Only three other participants left at later points in the survey. It was an intentional choice on the part of the researchers to put the most offensive words, the seven dirty words, first in the survey. The thought was that those offended by these words would leave the survey earlier as opposed to later, thus not wasting their time or the time of the researchers in culling their responses out of the results. This appears to have been successful, as a significant majority of those who left the survey exited after having electronically signed the informed consent, but prior to rating the word, "cocksucker."

## **Conclusion**

Profanity and how it relates to perception impacts many different realms of interpersonal communication. This research found that gender does not have a significant difference on the perception of profanity, nor does political affiliation. The only significance the findings yielded was within the realm of authority figures, which showed that profanity usage by professors, parents, and bosses is viewed more negatively by college students than when it is used by their peers. This was consistent with the literature; however, this study was unique in that it included parent-child and professor-student relationships as factors. Regardless of what sphere profanity is found in, it undeniably impacts daily life and relationships, which signifies its importance and relevance today.

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