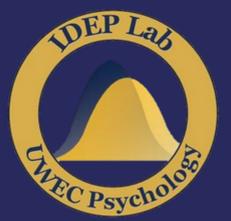




Perceptions of Profanity: The Complexities of Category and Context

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INTRODUCTION

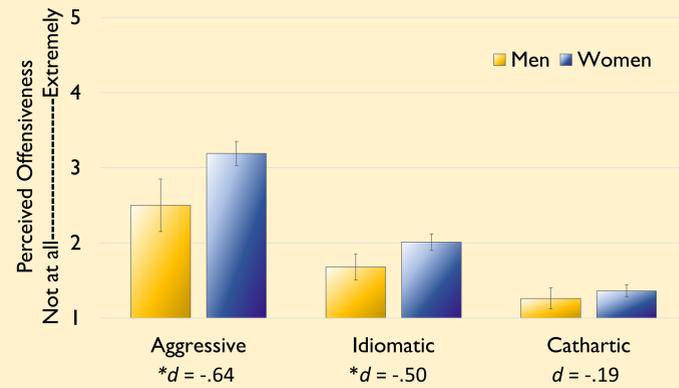
In the current study, we tested systematically the idea that people's responses to a given swear word are related to the conceptual category to which the swear word belongs and the context in which the word is used. We also tested predictions about individuals' use of taboo language and reactions to taboo language as a function of their gender and sexual attitudes (i.e., attitudes toward short-term and long-term mating). Specifically, we tested the following predictions:

- (1) participants will perceive aggressive taboo language as more offensive than cathartic or idiomatic taboo language;
- (2) men will use taboo language more frequently, and perceive it as less offensive, than women will; and
- (3) for women, in particular, more frequent use of genital-sexual taboo language will be associated with holding more promiscuous sexual attitudes.

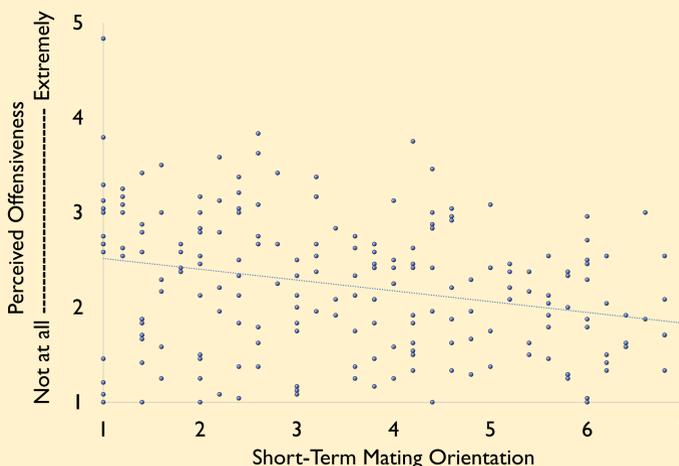
Women Perceived Taboo Language as More Offensive than Men Did



Participants Perceived Aggressive Taboo Language as More Offensive than Idiomatic or Cathartic Taboo Language



Participants with More Promiscuous Sexual Attitudes Perceived Taboo Language as Less Offensive



METHOD

We selected swear words from each of three different categories (Religious: hell, damn; Excretory: shit, piss; Sexual-Genital: pussy, cock, fuck) and chose phrases for their use in three different contexts (e.g., Idiomatic: "They are up shit creek"; Cathartic: "Shit, that took a while!"; Aggressive: "You're a piece of shit"). One sample of young adults rated how offended they were by such phrases (N=212); another sample rated how often they used such phrases (N=212). All participants completed measures of their personality, religiousness, and attitudes toward short-term and long-term mating.

Offensiveness Ratings Mean [95% CI]	Taboo Words and Statements	Frequency Ratings Mean [95% CI]
Fuck		
3.25 [3.06, 3.44]	Aggressive: "Fuck you."	3.62 [3.43, 3.81]
1.92 [1.78, 2.06]	Idiomatic: "They just got fucked up."	2.96 [2.77, 3.15]
1.30 [1.21, 1.39]	Cathartic: "Oh fuck, I forgot about that."	3.91 [3.74, 4.08]
Shit		
3.47 [3.29, 3.65]	Aggressive: "You're a piece of shit."	2.56 [2.37, 2.75]
1.92 [1.78, 2.06]	Idiomatic: "They are up shit creek."	1.42 [1.29, 1.55]
1.34 [1.25, 1.43]	Cathartic: "Shit, that took awhile."	2.88 [2.68, 3.08]
Ass		
2.75 [2.57, 2.93]	Aggressive: "You're such an ass."	2.94 [2.75, 3.13]
1.19 [1.11, 1.27]	Idiomatic: "That's badass."	3.00 [2.81, 3.19]
Damn		
2.33 [2.16, 2.50]	Aggressive: "Damn you."	2.10 [1.92, 2.28]
1.48 [1.36, 1.60]	Idiomatic: "You're damned if you do, damned if you don't."	1.95 [1.79, 2.11]
1.19 [1.12, 1.26]	Cathartic: "Damn, that hurt."	3.14 [2.94, 3.34]
Hell		
3.12 [2.92, 3.31]	Aggressive: "Go to hell."	2.29 [2.10, 2.48]
1.18 [1.11, 1.25]	Idiomatic: "It's hot as hell in here."	3.51 [3.33, 3.69]
1.35 [1.25, 1.45]	Cathartic: "What the hell!"	3.95 [3.79, 4.11]
Pussy		
3.51 [3.34, 3.68]	Aggressive: "You're being a pussy."	2.07 [1.89, 2.25]
3.35 [3.18, 3.52]	Idiomatic: "They're pussy-whipped."	1.35 [1.24, 1.46]
Bitch		
3.40 [3.22, 3.58]	Aggressive: "You're such a bitch."	2.88 [2.68, 3.08]
1.54 [1.42, 1.66]	Idiomatic: "Life's a bitch."	2.78 [2.59, 2.97]
1.70 [1.58, 1.82]	Cathartic: "Son of a bitch."	2.75 [2.55, 2.95]
Cock		
3.17 [3.00, 3.34]	Aggressive: "You're being a cock."	1.67 [1.50, 1.84]
2.67 [2.49, 2.85]	Idiomatic: "Cock it up."	1.16 [1.08, 1.24]
Piss		
2.47 [2.30, 2.64]	Aggressive: "Piss off."	2.03 [1.85, 2.21]
2.37 [2.22, 2.52]	Idiomatic: "They're pissing their life away."	1.59 [1.46, 1.72]
1.17 [1.10, 1.24]	Cathartic: "Oh, I'm pissed."	3.55 [3.37, 3.73]

Participants showed strong internal consistency in their reported use of varying types of taboo language ($\alpha = .95$) and in their offensiveness ratings ($\alpha = .95$).

DISCUSSION

Some people "swear like a sailor," while others never swear; some people enjoy the shock appeal and variety of profane words that exist, while others cringe at even a hint of profanity. One objective of the current research was to examine how individuals' reactions to taboo language, and their likelihood of using taboo language, differs by the type of taboo word that is involved and the way it is used. Using just a small sample of nine well-known words, we showed that taboo words that denote sex and genitalia (such as "pussy" and "cock") are perceived as more offensive than words that denote body excrement (such as "shit" and "piss") and religious words (such as "hell" and "damn"), but they aren't used less often. We also found that aggressive uses of taboo words were perceived as more offensive than idiomatic and cathartic uses, but some aggressive phrases (such as, "You're such a bitch") were used as often as idiomatic ("Life's a bitch") and cathartic ("Son of a bitch") uses.

A second objective of the current research was to investigate whether participants' gender and attitudes would be related to their reactions to and use of taboo language. In fact, women perceived taboo language as more offensive than men did, particularly sexual taboo words. The scatter plots at lower left and lower right show that participants who were more interested in casual sex were less offended by profanity and used it more often; this pattern was revealed for both men and women, for all categories of taboo language.

In addition, individuals who were less religious and less morally concerned about purity and sanctity rated taboo language as less offensive and used it more often, thus suggesting that people's use of taboo language may be a subtle (or not so subtle?) cue to various aspects of their sexual and social attitudes.

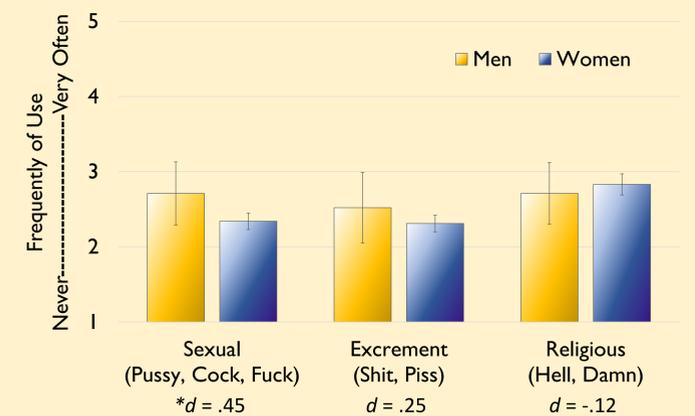
In this research, we included just a limited number of well-known taboo words, and future work could expand upon our efforts by considering reactions to taboo words we did not include (e.g., bastard, prick, cunt, and so on) as well as how people react to words as a function of who says them and in which circumstance. For example, we predict that women and men react differently to a female versus male friend, or a female versus male teammate, telling them, "You're being a pussy" or "Fuck you."

RESULTS

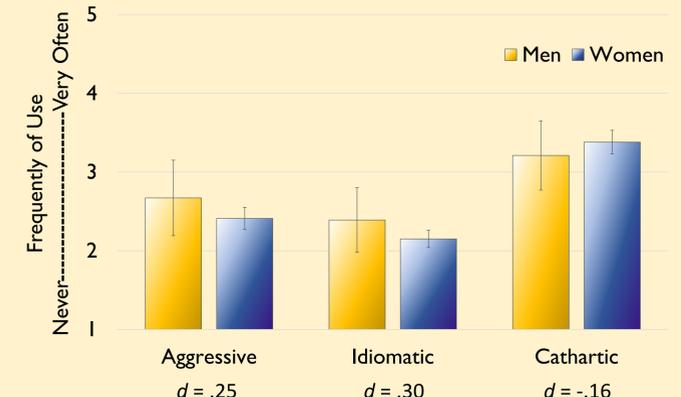
Overall, as shown in the table at left, participants reported frequent use of the words "fuck" and "shit," and infrequent use of the words "cock" and "pussy." Although "fuck" was frequently used in the aggressive context, it was also rated as moderately offensive when used aggressively.

In support of Prediction 1, participants rated aggressive uses of taboo words as the most (yet just moderately) offensive, idiomatic uses as slightly offensive, and cathartic uses as not at all offensive. In partial support of Prediction 2, men rated taboo language as less offensive than women did; however, in terms of frequency of use, men used only sexual taboo words more often than women did. In support of Prediction 3, use of sexual taboo language was positively associated with promiscuous sexual attitudes; this was the case for men as well as for women.

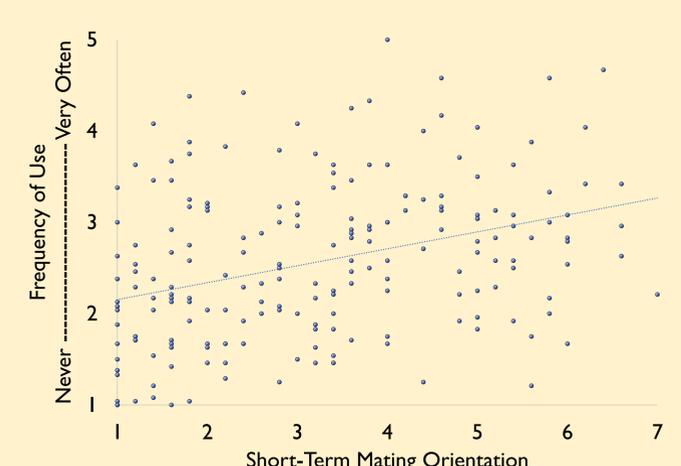
Men Used Only Sexual Taboo Words More Often than Women Did



Participants Used Cathartic Taboo Language More Frequently than Aggressive or Idiomatic Taboo Language



Participants with More Promiscuous Sexual Attitudes Reported More Frequent Use of Taboo Language



BACKGROUND LITERATURE

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