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Gender Linked Derogatory Terms

My project group conducted a replication study of Deborah James' linguistic study relating to gender-linked derogatory terms, and the way they are used by both men and women. In her original 1995 study, she had a large lecture class of college-aged students (at the University of Toronto) complete a questionnaire concerning the familiarity, personal context, and frequency of use for a list of 15 common derogatory terms. For our replication study, we conducted a similar electronic survey on InQsist using a related, yet modified list of 12 words which we deemed current, relevant derogatory terms in common use today. Most respondents were between the ages of 18-24 years old, and all were required to be Ball State students. Overall, we collected about 80 total responses.

In each survey, respondents were able to gauge their familiarity, the gender or neutrality they associated with each word, as well as their own definitions and other words they might use in place of each word. By analyzing general trends in the collected data, we were able to discover new information concerning the genders and meanings associated with each derogatory term. In the end, our results were, in several ways, very similar to the results found in James' study.

In James' study, she found that most male-based derogatory terms tended to attack a male's overall competence, as well as their physical or intellectual abilities, while female-based terms mostly insulted the female's behavior, or sexual promiscuity. In our hypothesis, this is also what we expected to find in our replication survey results.

Our results definitely support this claim, as we can observe by looking at responses pertaining to the terms "Bastard" and "Whore". As a whole, both male and female respondents said that a whore is a woman who "sleeps around", has sex outside of a committed relationship, or generally acts in a promiscuous or inappropriate manner. Responses for this word, along with responses for cunt, bitch,

etc., mainly concern a female's behavior and sexual purity/impurity. For male-based words, however, it was very apparent to us that it's much more offensive for men to receive insults pertaining to their strength or lack of strength, their intelligence level, and especially questioning a male's masculinity or social agreeability. In this aspect, our findings match up successfully with James' findings.

In our predictions, we also anticipated that males and females would make different gender assignments for the same words. For example, we thought that men might occasionally describe the term "bitch" to be more of a neutral or male-based word, in the sense that it could describe a "wimpy" male, while females would probably associate the term mainly with women, in the sense that it describes a malicious female.

Despite our hypothesis, it seems that the gender assignments were, in several cases, very similar among the genders. For example, this is apparent when we analyze the results pertaining to the term "asshole." About 68% of males associated this word with a male context, and about 58% of females made the same association. However, none of the females related this word to a female context, while about 5% of males associated the word with women.

An even closer match of percentages occurred pertaining to the term "bitch", which totally contradicted part of our initial prediction. Male and female responses for this term were nearly identical, with 83% of men assigning a female association with the word, and 82% of females making that same association. Interestingly, neither females nor males had any responses that assigned the word "bitch" to a male context. All responses were either "neutral" or "female", implying that both males and females agreed on this unanimously.

Perhaps one explanation behind this unanimous female assignment to the term "bitch" can be seen in a similar study conducted by Aryn L. Grossman and Joan S. Tucker at Brandeis University in 1997. This study explored gender differences and sexism within the knowledge and use of common slang words. Men and women in their study were instructed to report all slang terms they knew, whether

those terms described men or women, and how frequently they used each term. The terms were then categorized as either sexual or non-sexual. Although men generally listed a larger amount of terms, there were no significant differences in gender assignments for each word between the males and females.

There were, however, more sexual terms listed that pertained to women rather than men. This is supported by the fact that there are about 220 expressions in the English language that relate to a sexually promiscuous woman, while there are only 22 terms that relate to a male equivalent. This study also found that initially positive words evolve into negative connotations more often in relation to women than with men. Because of the larger presence of female derogatory terms, both men and women are more inclined and accustomed to assign certain female connotations to several negative or derogatory terms. This point is similarly expressed in James' original study.

Another intriguing aspect of our replication survey results can be seen through analysis of the data concerning the term "cunt". For this word, there were no males who assigned a male connotation to the word, while about 5% of the females said they would primarily assign it to males. Also, females rated this word as a more neutral word than the men did, with 7% of men and 14% of women rating it neutrally. This information might be surprising to men, largely due to the way that language practices reinforce the way that culture perceives women, usually placing females in subordinate, more proper roles. But, contrary to this assumption, women have been known to create their own set of derogatory terms used to describe men, which appears to be a definite language variation in comparison to the majority of studies relating to male/female swearing practices.

Illustrating this idea that women use their own derogatory terms for men, despite cultural expectations of their vocabulary and speech, is a study produced by Barbara Risch from the University of Cincinnati titled, "Women's Derogatory Terms for Men: That's Right, "Dirty" Words". In this study, strictly women were both interviewed and given questionnaires in freshman and sophomore English

classes. Most of the women averaged to be ages 19-21 years old, largely Caucasians, and 84% of them were classified as “middle class”. Respondents were asked to think of derogatory terms that they, or their peers, used for men, solely as equivalent derogatory or sexist terms that men use for women (such as broad, chick, cunt, piece of ass, etc.).

The list of term responses from the women in this study were then separated into categories pertaining to particular objects or ideas relating to the individual insults reported. These categories were “Birth”, “Ass”, “Head”, “Dick”, “Boys”, “Animal”, “Meat”, and “Other”. In general, Risch found that her study really began to question the validity of the assumption that women tend to use more standard or proper forms of speech. Contrary to earlier research supporting the assumption that working class women are more likely to swear or use nonstandard forms of speech (which was also mentioned in classroom discussion), the women respondents in this study came largely from middle-class families, and most respondents actually admitted to personally using most of the terms on their response lists.

Risch suggested that this nonstandard variety of female speech displays a certain value of covert prestige among groups of females who use this type of language in reference to males. For example, many females reported using largely female-linked derogatory terms, such as “whore”, “bitch”, or “slut” to refer to males. On the same token, Risch noted that, on occasion, males will practice the same type of speech patterns, referring to a woman as a “dick”, etc. As a whole, Risch’s study introduced the question of whether or not female and male-linked sexist/derogatory terms are starting to lose their initially perceived gender assignments.

Although the majority of the data collected for our study doesn’t actually match up with the results in Risch’s study, her findings on true female speech habits most likely explain the larger male-based assignments to the word “cunt” among the females in our study, despite the general disapproval and/or unfamiliarity of the use of this particular word among both genders. It’s interesting, after comparing our data to the data of Risch’s study, to observe that both females and males in our

replication study responded exactly the same way in relation to the term “dick”, even though Risch mentioned that men might occasionally use this term in reference to women. In our study, both females and males unanimously rated this word to be 93% male, 5% neutral, and 2% female linked. However, 2% of male respondents assigned a female connotation to the term “motherfucker”, while there were no females who associated the term with women. Females did, however, rate the term more largely neutral than men did.

Both males and females in our study responded similarly within the personal written definitions recorded for each term. All across the board, it was relatively unanimous that the term “motherfucker” was considered to be a word that describes someone you’re angry with, someone who often upsets others, or someone who intentionally tries to offend people. Similarly, both men and women seemed to agree on descriptions the terms “retard”, “idiot”, “gay”, and “cunt”, etc. in the same general sense of both social connotations and definitions.

The data from our replication study produced both similar and different results from the original study by Deborah James. We found that the different specific aspects of derogatory terms that are considered to be offensive to males and females (such as strength, intelligence, promiscuity, etc.) are still very relevant to the offensive aspects found by James. However, we also found that males and females agree on gender assignments pertaining to individual derogatory terms more often than we initially anticipated that they would. We were also able to see unique and humorous personal definitions for individual terms, and were also able to successfully link classroom discussions as well as outside research studies to the general trends suggested by our survey data.

Overall, our replication study was successfully informative and gave us a much better picture of the true social and gender assignments pertaining to common derogatory terms currently used in our culture, as well as the reasoning behind those specific gender assignments.

Bibliography

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