

Spring 2015

# Use and Perception of Taboo Language in College-Age Females

Kathleen M. Uhlman

*University of New Hampshire - Main Campus, kmi273@wildcats.unh.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.unh.edu/honors>



Part of the [Language Description and Documentation Commons](#), and the [Other Linguistics Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Uhlman, Kathleen M., "Use and Perception of Taboo Language in College-Age Females" (2015). *Honors Theses and Capstones*. 227.  
<http://scholars.unh.edu/honors/227>

This Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses and Capstones by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [nicole.hentz@unh.edu](mailto:nicole.hentz@unh.edu).

---

# Use and Perception of Taboo Language in College-Age Females

**Keywords**

taboo language, swears, gender, gender and language

**Subject Categories**

Language Description and Documentation | Other Linguistics

# Use and Perception of Taboo Language in College-Age Females

Kathleen M. Uhlman  
Department of Linguistics  
University of New Hampshire

## Abstract

This paper presents a study of the perceived use of swears in a small sample of college-age females versus their actual use in familiar social settings. Data was collected through two methods: a questionnaire in which participants answered questions about their frequency of use of a list of swears and their perceived offensiveness of each one, as well as through natural observation of the participants in conversation with each other and with other friends both male and female. The goal of this line of research is to dispel the widely-cited proposal by Robin Lakoff (1973) that women use weaker taboo language or no taboo language at all, which was ultimately achieved, as the majority of participants reported swearing frequently and did so in their actual conversations, both all-female and mixed. Additionally, they used a mixture of less and more offensive words.

### 1.0 Introduction

Robin Lakoff (1973) suggests that there are distinct, gender-based characteristics of oral language that differ between men and women, and that these differences reinforce, reflect, and create female subordination in patriarchal societies. The disparity in language between genders renders “women’s speech tentative, powerless, and trivial...[and] disqualifies them from positions of power and authority” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 1) according to some. If this is true it could have potentially devastating consequences on the identity, social position, and perception of the female speaker. In this paper I will argue against Lakoff’s proposition that female speech is both weak and vastly different than male speech through concentrating on use of strong taboo<sup>1</sup> language in college-age women. In order to do so, I conducted a two-part investigation of the use of taboo language in this demographic of women using both a questionnaire to gauge their perceived frequency of use and offensiveness ratings, and naturalistic observations to determine what their actual use of these taboos is like in both single- and mixed-gender conversation.

### 1.1 Hypothesis

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this piece, taboo and swear will be used interchangeably, although in some more in-depth research a distinction is made between the two.

While Lakoff's findings may have held some weight four decades ago, I believe them to be outdated and that today's young woman does not subscribe to the characteristics of women's language that Lakoff put forth. I am choosing to focus on use of taboo words for the sole reason that swears are often employed for the strong emotional impact they provide on both the part of the speaker and listener. If women truly use taboos less frequently than men, as Lakoff asserts, then they are underutilizing an outlet for visceral emotional responses and limiting expressive language use.

Therefore, I hypothesize that college-age women swear frequently in conversation both in single-gender and mixed-gender social settings and that the gender of their audience has no bearing on whether or not they swear. I also hypothesize that their perception of their own use will match actual use, through both frequency of use and the perceived offensiveness of the swear. Finally, I propose that college-age women will use swears rated as very offensive, not just 'weaker' or less offensive taboos.

## 2.0 Literature Review

It is nearly impossible to discuss issues of gender<sup>2</sup> and language without first acknowledging Robin Lakoff and her work *Language and Woman's Place (LWP)*. As oft-cited as it is controversial, *LWP*, published first in 1973 as an article in the journal *Language in Society* and then again in 1975 as an expanded monograph that includes the original article, is widely considered to be the catalyst for the relatively new study of gender and language in sociolinguistics. The focus of the original article form of *LWP* is two-fold: how language is used *by* and *about* women. Lakoff first posits that there exists a linguistic disparity between how men and women speak. She labels this disparity in terms of the woman's point-of-view, calling into question the notion of women's language (WL). Women's language, she argues, can be identified by eleven or so distinct linguistic features. These include:

---

<sup>2</sup> Although 'gender' and 'sex' are often used interchangeably in contemporary English, it is critical for the purposes of this research to denote the distinction between the two. While sex is a form of categorization based on biological criteria, gender is a social construction that give way to distinct and assumed identities based on assigned characteristics. In modern English-speaking societies, a binary gender system (male/female) is in place.

- 1) hedges (e.g., “sort of” or any other mitigating word that decreases the impact of a statement)
- 2) fillers (e.g., “you know,” “I mean,” “basically”)
- 3) tag questions (e.g., “...isn’t it?”)
- 4) rising intonation or ‘uptalk,’ even in non-interrogative utterances
- 5) so-called ‘empty’ adjectives (e.g., *cute*, *beautiful*)
- 6) precise color terminology (e.g., *turquoise* and *cerulean* versus *blue*)
- 7) intensifiers (e.g., *so*, *very*, *really*)
- 8) adherence to standard forms of language
- 9) increased use of polite forms, such as indirect requests and euphemism
- 10) avoidance of strong taboo language
- 11) avoidance of interruption (Lakoff, 1973; Van Herk, 2012: 86-87)

The common theme among many of these characteristics, according to Lakoff, is the non-committal and “weak” nature of the utterances they would produce. For instance, use of tag questions and hedges suggest lack of confidence on the part of the speaker and allows the listener to insert their own meaning instead of the intended one or “provide a means whereby the speaker...[can look] to the addressee for confirmation” (Lakoff, 1973: 55). Intensifiers signal a need for the veracity and strength of a statement to be taken seriously and give reassurance as such. Use of polite forms and avoidance of swears limit the speaker’s expressive ability and the means through which they can display strong emotion.

In short, the linguistic subordination displayed in WL reflects women’s subordinate position in society. It is important here to note that a widely held tenet of studies of power and privilege in social systems that the dominant social group tends to set the standards, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, that are generally adhered to by the out-group. In the case of gender, males are overwhelmingly regarded as the favored group or the group in power, which not only puts females in the out-group, but also dictates the nature of their speech patterns as ‘subnormal’ as they are not the ‘neutral’ or ‘normal’ patterns of male speech. Therefore, if women are using ‘weaker’ and less assertive language then they are repeatedly and openly displaying their “marginality and powerlessness” (Lakoff, 1973: 45). Additionally, Lakoff believes that they are perpetuating their subordination through linguistic positioning with respect to male speakers, in not employing stronger speech characteristics. She claims that at an early age, a girl is taught to use WL: if she “talks rough like a boy, she will normally be ostracized, scolded, or made fun

of...[which keeps] her in her place” (Lakoff, 1973: 47). This avoidance of supposedly unfeminine language is later called into question in adulthood, when women are accused of speaking less forcefully, precisely, and seriously (Lakoff, 1973: 48). Therefore, women are left with the difficult choice of appearing as “less than a woman or less than a person” (Lakoff, 1973: 48) through their linguistic usage. As such, women can find themselves in the precarious position of either being outspoken at the risk of shirking their femininity or allowing their opinions and ideas to be trampled underfoot – truly a case of nutting up or shutting up.

Lakoff also explores the ways in which women are spoken of, or “the way general language use treats them” (1973: 46). She suggests that language used to label and discuss women is also indicative of women’s subordinate position in society. She claims that differentiation in terminology tends to be both derogatory toward women and position them solely in terms of their relationship to men (Thorne, 1976: 744). For instance, Lakoff makes the distinction between *bachelor* and *spinster*, *master* and *mistress*, and the notion that in wedding vows the officiant pronounces the newlyweds ‘man and wife’ rather than ‘woman and husband.’ (Lakoff 1973).

### *2.1 Criticism of Lakoff’s Work*

Despite being labeled the “single most influential text in introducing language and gender issues” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2012: 5), the views Lakoff presents in *LWP* have been highly contested and controversial in the four decades since its publication. The major criticism of *LWP* stems from Lakoff’s methods of data collection (or lack thereof). In her work she states that she makes her claims based “mainly on introspection” (1973: 46) and anecdotal evidence. She used her own speech, the speech of the women she knows, as well as representations of female speech in the media, and used “[her]...intuitions in analyzing it” (1973: 46). Critics and reviewers, particularly Lenora Timm (1976) and Barrie Thorne (1976), Lakoff’s contemporaries in gender studies and language, cite her sweeping claims and lack of systematic, empirical research as serious reasons to dispute her theories. They scathingly imply that Lakoff has a limited working knowledge of sociolinguistics, a fledgling area of linguistics at the time, and neglects

sociolinguistic principles and methodology. In fact, many accuse her of ascribing folk linguistic<sup>3</sup> suppositions to her research, though *LWP* is regarded as a well-recognized sociolinguistic study of language and gender today.

A second criticism of Lakoff's work is that she seems to consider women's language patently inferior to male speech. She suggests that there is something "intrinsically wrong with women's language and that women should speak like men if they want to be taken seriously" (Coates, 2004: 6) and assumes superiority of male forms of speech, which she equates with neutral or normal speech. Thorne, in her 1976 review of the monograph of *LWP*, describes Lakoff's views of women's language as seeing it as a handicap or disability inflicted upon women, rather than exploring its possible strengths, such as its facilitative and supportive nature (745). She brings into question the notion that, while Lakoff is attempting to highlight and discuss cultural assumptions and their influence on language, that she is actually imbibing her research with these very assumptions.

However, Lakoff addresses some of these critiques of her research within her article. She states that her assertions are "not meant to suggest that either the methodology or the results are final, or perfect" (1973: 47), and that while she stands firm behind the beliefs she has put forth, her ultimate goal with *LWP* was to create a taking-off point for further studies, which, subsequently, has been the case. Timm (1976), who had sardonically noted that Lakoff displays flair for "largely speculative tasks" (249) does concede that many of these unsupported assertions could easily be reformulated into testable hypotheses that could then be turned into valid evidence for or against the linguistic features Lakoff outlines (251). Most of her critics do support this suggestion, and tout the fact that Lakoff does deserve recognition for breaking new ground in a formerly neglected line of linguistic research.

## 2.2 Lakoff's Legacy

In fact, despite the criticism and debate that Lakoff and *LWP* have sparked, this work is often the cornerstone of other research and academic literature on gender and language. One of

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Folk linguistics' is often used as a pejorative term to describe linguistic beliefs put forth by amateur- or lay-observers of the language; usually their claims are at odds with or dismissed as illegitimate by experts in the field.



the most famous examples of this can be seen through the work of Deborah Tannen. Tannen, formerly a student of Lakoff's, is well-known for her research on what she calls the difference model, which claims that "women and men belong to different subcultures" (Coates, 2004: 6) where women employ a rapport style of language to build and maintain relationships while men use language to communicate or report facts (Van Herk, 2012: 89). This contrasts with Lakoff's approach, now known as the deficit or dominance model. In this model women's language is the result of a deficiency created by male dominance and female subordination (Coates, 2004: 6). Whereas Tannen's model celebrates women's language for its differences and "allows [it] to be examined outside a framework of oppression or powerlessness" (Coates, 2004: 6), Lakoff's model posits that there are inherent flaws in WL. Though their models are in opposition, Lakoff's work aided in the formation of Tannen's research, as well as the currently held approach, known as the dynamic approach, in which gender identity is viewed as a construct of society at large and that members of a society "do gender" rather than "are a gender" (Coates, 2004: 6), meaning any linguistic differences are fluid as gender roles and characteristics evolve.

Furthermore, in keeping with Timm's suggestion of developing hypotheses borne of Lakoff's speculation, numerous studies have been performed that test her linguistic claims, with varying results. DuBois and Crouch (1975), Bradley (1981), Cameron et al. (1988), and Fasold (1990) examined frequency of tag questions, and found that use of this linguistic form varied with respect to context, intent, and a number of other variables that did not necessarily include gender of conversational participants. James and Clarke (1993) studied use of interruption in great depth and discovered that there did not appear to be any significant gender difference, though females seemed to employ interruption for different means than males did.

### *2.3 Taboo Language*

Women's use of taboo language in various contexts is another oft-studied spin-off of Lakoff's research. But what is taboo language? Timothy Jay, a prolific researcher on taboo language, defines it as "a rich emotional, psychological, and sociocultural phenomenon...[which is] sanctioned or restricted on both institutional and individual levels under the assumption that some harm will occur if [it] is spoken" (Jay, 2009: 153). We commonly think of taboo language

under the broad concept of swearing, but taboos can be categorized in a number of ways, depending on the culture. In English taboos are classified under nine distinct subheadings:

“...sexual references (*blow job, cunt*);...those considered profane or blasphemous (*goddamn, Jesus Christ*);...scatological references and disgusting objects (*shit, crap, douche bag*); some animal names (*bitch, pig, ass*); ethnic-racial-gender slurs (*nigger, fag, dago*); insulting references to perceived psychological, physical, or social deviations (*retard, wimp, lard ass*); ancestral allusions (*son of a bitch, bastard*); substandard vulgar terms (*fart face, on the rag*); and offensive slang (*cluster fuck, tit run*)” (Jay, 2009: 154)

Taboos or swears are most often employed to connote various emotions, from anger and frustration to joy and surprise. In fact, according to Jay, this is the main reason for swearing, that “one can achieve a myriad of personal and social goals with them...[including] emotional communication to a degree that non-taboo words cannot [convey]” (2009: 155). Despite this important usage, it is a widely held belief that “avoidance of swearing and of ‘coarse’ words is held up to female speakers as the ideal to be aimed at” (Coates, 2004: 15). Women’s speech is generally regarded as more polite, refined, and ‘ladylike’ so the “stronger expletives are reserved for men, and the weaker ones for women” (Lakoff, 1973: 50), which allows men stronger means of expression.

In fact, public perception has repeatedly upheld this view. Evidence suggests that this may be true to a certain extent, but not completely. For instance, Jay (2009), after a series of observations of frequency and offensiveness ratings tasks, claims that men accounted for 67% of public swearing in 1986, though the gap narrowed to 55% by 2006 and that men say more offensive words than women do (156). Additionally, it is also thought that accommodation occurs in mixed-gender contexts, meaning that the perceived gender norms are adhered to by the opposite gender -- men will decrease their use of taboo, while women will increase it, perhaps due to the expectation that men use profanity more than women but should not use it around them (Coates, 2004: 98; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 70). However, while it seems this may have held true for older generations (older men were reported to use more profanity than women their age), this disparity appears to be narrowing currently, as studies have shown that

younger men and women use taboos at about the same rate as this type of linguistic usage plays an important role in social bonding (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 156).

Notably, Vivian De Klerk has conducted multiple studies on expletive usage in current contexts, based on a variety of social factors including gender. She found that while women have “long been regarded as upholding...taboos and avoiding nonstandard or ‘dirty’ words” (1992: 277) this theory is long overdue for reconsideration and that “female linguistic habits do not match commonly held perceptions” (1992: 288). De Klerk also noted that while speech styles, particularly through use of expletives, are reflective of imbalances of power, this imbalance is not necessarily a reflection of gender disparities but of discrepancies in power based on many social factors (i.e., age, education, etc.). Ultimately, she concludes, female speakers are “familiar with and increasingly ready to use a wide range of taboo words” and the “stereotypes of the tough-talking male and the pure, never-swearing female are false” (Coates, 2004: 98).

### 3.0 Methods

#### *3.1 Basis for Methodological Approach*

It was important for research of this nature to employ both experimental and naturalistic methodology in data collection. Each approach alone would provide insufficient evidence to support or refute any claims made, and leave results wide open for criticism from all angles. The experimental aspect of the methodology specifically tests for and isolates an independent variable, in this case participants’ opinions on the frequency with which they use various swears and their perception of the offensiveness of each. This also allows for control over confounding factors to test for use of swears as participants have also been carefully selected based on specific criteria, such as age and educational background. Additionally, the naturalistic aspect allows for data to be collected virtually free from manipulation on my part. In performing more natural observations of actual conversations, clearer, more authentic representation of participants’ speech can be provided. It is my hope that this combination of methods lends validity to the data collected.

#### *3.2 Participants*

For this study, two social factors were of the utmost importance: that I know all of my participants well and that my participants know each other well. First, I needed access to all participants for both the ‘perception’ and ‘use’ phase in order to compare the two. Second, as natural conversation was crucial to determine actual usage of swears by participants it necessitates that they had to be comfortable with both me and each other. If my participants were strangers to either me or one another they may have tried to accommodate their language, but if we are all friends it was less likely that they would be hyper-aware of what they were saying to each other or were at risk of observer influence. Therefore, all of my 11 participants were part of one of two established social groups who have already built up a rapport with one another, as well as being social groups I am well-acquainted with. Additionally, in order to make gender the foremost variable in this study, each participant was college-aged -- between the ages of 19 and 22, with the average age at 21 years old -- and all participants have attended university for at least two years.

I thought that this was an important distinction for a few reasons. To start, this removes education as a confounding factor, as well as socioeconomic status (SES) to a certain extent, as education is usually an indicator of SES. Also, this suggests that all participants are exposed to the same current environment, albeit a very academic, generally liberal one, which could be indicative of how beliefs are tied into language usage. Finally, if I was to refute Lakoff’s claims in any significant way I thought it best to find examples of the ‘modern woman’ to study, so who better than the upcoming generation of educated females forty years after-the-fact, rather than women who were already forty at the time of Lakoff’s research? The women she based her study on included herself and her colleagues, who were academics, so it made sense to continue with the academic theme.

### *3.3 Materials*

I created a self-report questionnaire based on designs employed in studies by Beers-Fägersten (2007, 2012) and Jay (1992) (see Appendix A). I generated both hard copies and an online survey for the convenience of participants, depending on which format they preferred. The questionnaire consisted of four parts: demographic information, frequency and context of usage, usage and exposure, and offensiveness ratings. Although the variable being tested is

gender, I wanted to examine the possible effect of some other factors, including SES, indicated by parental occupation and levels of education, influence of the presence of same- or different-gender siblings, and religious background. As all of the participants were female, these qualities could serve to explain disparities in frequency and type of swear usage between participants. The second portion, frequency and context of usage, required participants to provide example sentences that were most representative of their usage of eleven different swears, as well as rating likelihood of usage on any given day using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from extremely unlikely (1) to extremely likely (7).

Part three, usage and exposure, prompted participants to divulge who swears around them and who they swear around in turn. Questions regarding swear use by and around participants' fathers and mothers were used to gauge a) the linguistic situation participants were raised in concerning swearing, b) if there was a difference between male and female use, and c) if there were generational disparities between their mothers and them. Questions about their use by and around female and male friends were employed to generate information on use in same- and opposite-gender interactions on both the part of the participants and their friends.<sup>4</sup> Finally, there were two questions relating to consciousness of swearing around people of the opposite gender and who they thought swore more: men or women. The last part of the questionnaire required participants to rate the offensiveness of each of the eleven swears using a ten-point Likert scale where points around one indicated not or less offensive and points around ten indicated more or very offensive. Participants were also asked to come up with words that they also found offensive that were not included on the list.

The basis for the swears included on the questionnaire can be found in both established studies on taboo language, particularly studies on gender and taboo, as well as anecdotal and personal observation. The major eleven swears, I determined, were the following: *asshole*, *bastard*, *bitch*, *cunt*, *damn*, *dick*, *fuck*, *hell*, *motherfucker*, *piss*, and *shit*, and any variation thereof (i.e., *fucking*, *bullshit*). Additionally, these span the breadth of taboo, from the holy (*hell*, *damn*) to the scatological (*piss*, *shit*), and others in between. The second portion of the study was

---

<sup>4</sup> Note: not around same-age males and females in general, but their friends specifically, to glean information on swear use in contexts in which they should feel comfortable where all of the participants are familiar to them.

observation-based. Conversations were discreetly audio-recorded and analysed for frequency of use of the aforementioned eleven swears by each participant present for the conversation.

### *3.4 Procedure*

Part One of the study was fairly straightforward. Participants were briefed on the nature of the study, specifically that it was designed to gather information on their personal use and beliefs on swear words through the use of a questionnaire and observation. They were told that they would first take the questionnaire and then, at a later, undisclosed date, they would be observed in conversation unbeknownst to them, in order to capture their utterances in the most candid manner possible. Consent on the part of the participants was required, and they were given the option of backing out of the study at any point. They were notified potential benefits and risks, as well. Though there were no direct benefits to the participants themselves, they were informed that their participation would help to gain insight into the burgeoning subfield of gender and language and could serve to either support or contradict previous research. The risks associated with the study were minimal, but participants were made aware that universally acknowledged offensive language would be used, and the more sensitive among them may have been repulsed by overt use of very profane language. Additionally, the conversations they were involved in may have turned personal in nature and other members of the social group were in a position to disclose information learned during this portion, which is merely a pitfall of peer-group interactions and not a direct result of the study. Finally, participants were assured of the confidentiality of the study.

Participants were given the questionnaire in either paper or online form and were told that they had two days to complete it, though most completed it within hours of receiving it. Part Two was completely based on observation. I opted to perform observations at points when the majority of participants were gathered in an informal, convivial gathering, either at home or at a friend's house, which would create naturalistic situations in which young women would typically congregate and chat freely, as a setting in which participants could feel comfortable and uninhibited was critical. As the researcher and observer my role in this part of the study was manifold. First and foremost, I was to partially play a fly-on-the-wall, so to speak, so as to fully

immerse myself in the observer's position and take in the scope of the conversation. However, it was also important that I operate as a facilitator, subtly prompting participants if the conversation got off track or faded out, or was not going in a direction that would promote use of swearing. For instance, retelling emotional events, even relatively benign ones, usually triggers emotional speech patterns (i.e., swearing) and makes the speaker less conscious of the language they are using, so I could have suggested discussing the scariest thing that ever happened to the participants or the worst date they ever went on. Finally, my presence was also vital in that I would later have to identify participants by voice alone on the audio recordings in order to compare their natural use of swears to their questionnaire answers. After recording four separate observations, I transcribed the audio and analysed the recordings for frequency of swears per participant as well as type of swear, based on the eleven words I selected for this study, in addition to some conversational content to lend context to the words used. These results were then compared to participants' responses to the questionnaire, particularly to those regarding frequency of use and offensiveness.

## 4.0 Results

### 4.1 *Questionnaire*

#### 4.1.1 *Demographic Information*

Though the variable being tested in this study was gender, I thought it important to gather additional, pertinent demographic information in order to explain discrepancies between use and perception of swears between participants. As noted above, the mean age of participants was 21 years old; the youngest was 19 and the oldest was 23. 55% of participants were in their fourth year at university, 27% were in their 3rd year, and 18% had attended for two years, meaning that all participants have been exposed to a similar educational and social environment for the past few years. Questions regarding parental employment and educational background were also asked, as these are often measures of SES, which has been studied as a factor for use of swearing (Beers-Fägersten 2007: 18). The breakdown of parental education levels (see Figure 1) as compared to occupation indicates that, in general, participants come from lower- to upper-middle class backgrounds (see Appendix B).

**Figure 1.** Parental education levels

<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>
<b>High School Diploma/GED</b>	18%	27%
<b>Some College - no degree</b>	18%	27%
<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	27%	18%
<b>Master's Degree</b>	18%	9%
<b>Professional Degree</b>	0%	9%
<b>Other</b>	18%	9%

Additionally, every participant had at least one sibling, which means they all had opportunities for ‘peer’ interaction at home in either same- or mixed-gender contexts. 45% had only female siblings, 18% had only male siblings, and 36% had both male and female siblings. 18% of participants are the younger sibling, 64% are the older sibling, and 18% have both younger and older siblings.

Religious background was also inquired upon and considered as a potential answer to differences in results. The majority (55% of participants) were raised to practice some form of organized religion, while 45% percent were not. Of the participants that were raised with religion, around 67% were raised Roman Catholic, 17% were raised to practice some Protestant denomination, and the other 17% responded that they were raised within an unspecified Christian household. Currently, however, an overwhelming 82% are no longer affiliated with an organized religion. The remaining 18% consisted of one Roman Catholic and one Unitarian Universalist (see Appendix B).

#### *4.1.2 Parent-Offspring Usage*

As far as parent-offspring use of swears is concerned, there were some disparities between father-daughter and mother-daughter linguistic relationships. 20% of participants reported that their fathers swear to or around them either often or sometimes, while the other 80% reported their fathers swore only rarely or never (see Figure 2). 50% of participants



responded that, in turn, they swear to or around their fathers sometimes, while 20% rarely swear around their fathers, and 30% never swear at all.

**Figure 2.** Father-daughter usage

	<b>Father</b>	<b>Daughter</b>
<b>Often</b>	10%	--
<b>Sometimes</b>	10%	50%
<b>Rarely</b>	40%	20%
<b>Never</b>	40%	30%

The questions regarding mother-daughter interactions prompted some interesting results. Participants answered that neither their mothers nor they swear often to or around each other, but 64% of daughters reported swearing sometimes around their mothers, while only 18% claim their mothers sometimes swear around them. Additionally, 18% of participants say they never swear around their mothers, though 55% suggest their mothers never swear around them (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Mother-daughter usage

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Daughter</b>
<b>Often</b>	--	--
<b>Sometimes</b>	18%	64%
<b>Rarely</b>	27%	18%
<b>Never</b>	55%	18%

#### *4.1.3 Peer Usage*

Participants indicated that they swear just as frequently as their female friends do when interacting with each other. 45% of participants reported that their friends often use swears around them, and they likewise often swear around their friends. 45% also report that they and their female friends sometimes use swears around each other, while 9% report rare usage. The results from questions on male to female peer interactions tell a different story, however. 64%

report that their male friends swear around them, while 45% say that they swear around their male friends. 55%, though, indicate that they sometimes swear around male friends, while 27% say their male friends sometimes swear around them. Furthermore, 9% indicate that their male friends will rarely swear around them, though all participants either often or sometimes use taboo language around male friends (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Peer use of swears

	Female Friend	Participants	Male Friend	Participants
<b>Often</b>	45%	45%	64%	45%
<b>Sometimes</b>	45%	45%	27%	55%
<b>Rarely</b>	9%	9%	9%	--
<b>Never</b>	--	--	--	--

#### 4.1.4 Beliefs on Same-/Mixed-Gender Swearing

75% of participants claim that they are not more conscious of swearing when they are around people of the opposite gender, while 25% believe they are more conscious of this. Additionally, 55% believe that men and women exhibit equal use of swears, though 45% did report that they believe men swear more frequently than women.

I asked respondents who answered ‘yes’ to whether they were more conscious of swearing around people of the opposite gender to follow up their affirmative response with reasoning for why they believe this to be so. Participant 3 wrote that she seems to consciously use swears around her male friends more often so that “they get the impression that [she’s] ‘one of the guys...so they perceive [her] as easygoing,” suggesting that she perceives swearing as a way to build up linguistic camaraderie. Participant 9 also reports swearing more around male friends, albeit inadvertently. She muses that “maybe this is because [she tries] to act ‘more cool’ around her male friends” and by more cool she means “less feminine.” Participant 9 also expresses the belief that it is unfeminine to swear “which is bullshit” and although she identifies herself as a feminist she also notes that she “associates strength with masculinity” which she

believes is an attractive quality and as such she tries to make “[her]self more attractive [by] act[ing] less feminine.”

Participant 11 had a different take on swearing around males. Rather than consciously using swearing as a means to build up a rapport and friendship with her male peers, she avoids swearing. She wrote, “I try to represent women well by being well spoken - hence not swearing as much.” She goes on to say that if she is swearing it is due to the fact that she knows her audience does not care, perhaps because she is well-acquainted or comfortable with them.

Participant 10 responded that she did not have an overt awareness of swearing around either gender, but that she avoids using them often because she believes them to pack more of a punch when they are used infrequently. Her ultimate goal with swearing, it seems, is to manipulate their use for pragmatic means, that is, she uses them for a surprise factor or emphasis in conversation and suggests that their overuse lessens their effect.

#### 4.1.5 Frequency of Use & Offensiveness Ratings

Frequency of use of the eleven selected swears was based on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = extremely unlikely, 2 = somewhat unlikely, 3 = unlikely, 4 = neutral, 5 = likely, 6 = somewhat likely, and 7 = extremely likely. According to the mean scores of frequency, *damn* and *fuck* were the most frequently used swears on any given day, as self-reported by the participants, with average ratings of 5.45 and 5.27, respectively. *Shit* and *hell* were runners up for usage frequency with scores of 4.91 and 4.82. The least likely to be used by a wide margin was *cunt*, with a frequency score of 1.36, or extremely unlikely. *Bastard* and *piss* were also unlikely to be used on a regular basis by participants, with average scores of 2.26 (*bastard*) and 2.27 (*piss*). Figure 5 displays the rank of each swear based on reported usage by participants.

**Figure 5.** Frequency of use from most likely to be used to least likely

1. Damn	5.45
2. Fuck	5.27
3. Shit	4.91
4. Hell	4.82
5. Bitch	4.09
6. Dick	3.91
7. Asshole	3.82
8. Motherfucker	3.45

9. Piss	2.27
10. Bastard	2.26
11. Cunt	1.36

Offensiveness was also rated on a Likert scale, this time a ten-point version where one or thereabouts indicated that a word was not or less offensive, mid-range scores indicated neutrality, and scores around ten indicated very or more offensive. All but one of the swears was rated at a three or below for an average score, meaning on average participants believed these words to not be very offensive at all. *Damn* and *hell* were rated the least offensive with scores of 1.45 and 1.55 respectively. *Fuck*, *asshole*, *shit*, and *bitch* were all rated from 2.12 to 2.62 on average, and *piss*, *motherfucker*, *bastard*, and *dick* had relatively similar scores with 3.01, 3.03, 3.04, and 3.17, respectively. Of note, however, was the offensiveness rating of *cunt*. The mean rating of offensiveness was 8.73, a huge leap from *dick*'s 3.17, the second most offensive on average, and the only word near the 'very offensive' end of the scale. Figure 6 shows the words ranked from least to most offensive.

**Figure 6.** Offensiveness ratings (least to most)

1. Damn	1.45
2. Hell	1.55
3. Fuck	2.12
4. Asshole	2.21
5. Shit	2.61
6. Bitch	2.62
7. Piss	3.01
8. Motherfucker	3.03
9. Bastard	3.04
10. Dick	3.17
11. Cunt	8.73

#### 4.1.6 Example Sentences

Participants were also asked to provide example sentences or contextual information for each of the selected swears in order to gauge what they would self-report as authentic use of each word. In most cases, the examples were strikingly similar across participants; in others, participants used certain swears more creatively or in unusual ways. Contextual usage also spanned from connotative or more emotional interpretations to using the words in the literal,

denotative sense. Figure 7 outlines the variety of ways each swear is claimed to be used by participants.

**Figure 7.** Examples of usage

<b>Asshole</b>	<b>Bastard</b>	<b>Bitch</b>	<b>Cunt</b>
Asshole! You're/he's/she's (such) an asshole What an asshole Fucking asshole You're a bleached asshole	You're/they're/he's a bastard That bastard The/those bastards Smelly bastard What a bastard Bastard(s)! He was the bastard son of...	She's such a bitch What a bitch That bitch Bitches be crazy All these bitches Basic bitches Bitch, please, I'm the shit That was a bitch I know I'm being a bitch now but... Bitchy Stop being a little bitch	What a cunt Fucking cunt Cunts!

<b>Damn</b>	<b>Dick</b>	<b>Fuck</b>	<b>Hell</b>
Damn it Damn it all to hell God damn (it) Damn, that tree is really tall Damn, that was good Aw damn Dayum	He's being a dick What a dick Dick My dick is bigger than yours Dickhole! Eat my dick Hit him in the dick	Fuck! What the fuck Fucking asshole Fucking cock Get the fuck away from me Fucking fuck Fucker Fucking shit Fuck you Fuck everything	What the hell Hell yeah!

<b>Motherfucker</b>	<b>Piss</b>	<b>Shit</b>
You motherfucker Fucking motherfucker That was a motherfucker Motherfuckers	Please don't piss on me I have to take a piss That pissed me off I'm pissed Piss off!	Shit! This is shit(ty) I feel like shit Getting shit done I get the shits

		Oh, shit! Shit fuck What a piece of shit I have to take a shit Holy shit I'm a pile of shit
--	--	--

There are three major observations I want to call into focus about this data. First, generally these swears are not often used in isolation, with a few exceptions. *Shit, motherfucker, fuck, dick, damn, cunt, bastard, and asshole* were all reported to be used as interjections, but this was not the most common form reported. Most of the time, they were employed within an utterance, not as an utterance in and of themselves. Also, a large number of examples showed these swears used in conjunction with one another, including *shit fuck, fucking shit/cock/asshole/cunt/motherfucker*, and *bitch, please, I'm the shit*. It also seems as though *shit* and *fuck* were the most versatile swears, based solely on the number of different examples given for each.

The second observation regards the use of the more gendered words within the selection of swears available. These include *bastard* and *dick*, usually coded as more male-oriented swears, and *bitch* and *cunt*, swears generally considered to refer to females. In the examples given, *bastard, dick*, and *bitch* all have gendered pronouns associated with their usage. For *bastard*, there were two instances of *he's a bastard* or *he's the bastard son of...* solely using the third-person, singular, masculine pronoun 'he,' with no instances of its female counterpart. The same phenomenon occurred with *dick*. *He's being a dick, he's such a dick*, and *did you hit him in the dick* were all provided as examples, but not once did anyone report using *she's such a dick* as a way of expressing the swear. *Bitch* also experienced a similar treatment, with a feminine twist. Participants wrote *she's such a bitch* versus *he's such a bitch*, though one participant did directly call her boyfriend a bitch in one of her examples, regarding his cowardice. *Cunt*, however, though highly gendered, was never treated as such in the examples, though this may be due to the fact that many participants claimed not to use it, or rated it as very offensive.

Thirdly, though swears are widely considered to be offensive in the public eye, the examples given in this study showed that swears can be used to express positive feelings in

addition to being employed as insults or reflections of exasperation or anger. For instance, while participants showed it is possible to *feel like shit* it is equally as possible to *be the shit*, which is considered something of a positive achievement, or to *get shit done*, which Participant 4 defined as expressing a sense of accomplishment when someone completes a lot of work. Along those same lines, somebody could express frustration using *god damn it* but could also express awe with *damn, you ran that race so fast* or *god damn, you are so beautiful*.

Of course, eleven swear words does not begin to cover the depth and breadth of taboo language in English, though each word was carefully selected for its assumed popularity and representation of the various forms of taboo. For this reason, participants were also asked to provide any words that they believed should have been included on the list. Most seemed satisfied with what had already been provided, but five new words were put on the table. *Nigga/nigger*, *god damnit*, *retard*, *penis*, and *tits* were all put forth as possible contenders for the taboo word list, though *god damnit* is more of an alternative form of *damn*, already on the list, and *penis* is merely the more medical or proper term for the slangy *dick*. However, the remaining three seemed like reasonable additions and may point toward current trends in taboo language (see Section 5.0).

## 4.2 Observations

The data from the observations was collected in the weeks following the completion of the questionnaire. Four separate conversations were observed: three were single-gender (all female) and the fourth was a mixed-gender conversation for purposes of comparison. As mentioned before, my role was as both an observer and facilitator. Luckily, however, facilitation was not really required, as the participants were naturally producing swears without prompting or priming, making the results truly representative of natural conversation on the part of the participants.

### 4.2.1 Observation I: The Textbook Incident

To put the first observation into context, Participant 1 had been experiencing trouble with getting a textbook she needed for some impending assignments. She had been on the phone with

a male representative of the company that was to ship the textbook and was feeling stressed and aggravated when he informed her it would not arrive on time. This conversation took place at the home of Participants 1, 3, 7, and 11 in the kitchen after everyone was home after class. Participant 4 was also present. The total duration of the conversation was around 18 minutes. Participant 1 used the most taboo language, perhaps because she was the one most directly and negatively affected by the situation (see Figure 8). The remaining four participants also used taboo language, but to a lesser extent. Within the context of the conversation it appeared as though they were using swears in a supportive and sympathetic fashion, possibly mirroring the model presented by Participant 1 in her frustration.

**Figure 8.** Frequency of use by participant - observation I

*Participant 1*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
1	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	2	1

*Participant 3*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	0

*Participant 4*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Participant 7*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

*Participant 11*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1

*Asshole, damn, dick, fuck, hell, piss, and shit* were the only swears of the eleven employed in this conversation, with *fuck, damn, piss, and shit* occurring the most frequently with 5, 4, 3, and 3 occurrences, respectively. *Bastard, bitch, cunt, and motherfucker* were avoided entirely, and *hell, dick, and asshole* only made single appearances.

There were also a number of variations on the ‘standard’ swear forms provided, just as there were with the example sentences. *Damn* was manifested as *damnit* or *god damnit*, *fuck* was represented as *fucking, why/what the fuck, and fuck it*, *hell* appeared as *why* or *what the hell*, *piss* was only ever used as *pissed*, and *shit* came in two forms: *bullshit* and *shitty*.



#### 4.2.2 Observation II: The Boyfriends

The second observation came about during an informal gathering at a female friend's apartment. Participants 3, 6, 8, 9 and 10 were present. The tone of the conversation was generally jovial and did not turn to negatively emotional or distressing issues, but rather toward the boyfriends of Participants, 3, 6, 8, and 10. The approximate duration of the conversation was 23 minutes. Figure 9 details the frequency of each swear used by the participants.

**Figure 8.** Frequency of use by participant - observation II

*Participant 3*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	1	0	1	3	0	1	0	0	0	0

*Participant 6*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	0

*Participant 8*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2

*Participant 9*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0

*Participant 10*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Unlike the first observation, every word except *asshole*, *hell*, and *piss* were used. The most frequently used words were *damn* (6) and *fuck* (4). Of note is the singular usage of *cunt* by Participant 3, which was used in joking reference to describe her boyfriend. Participant 10 employed *bitch* twice in the discussion of her boyfriend, an interesting usage as these are gendered taboos that are usually linked to females. The single use of *bastard* was in reference to the traditional, birth-related sense. Also, one of the instances of *fuck* was manifested as *fucking cock* in reference to a toe stubbed suddenly in a doorway, and the one use of *motherfucker* was

exclaimed as Participant 7 discovered that she had forgotten to send an important email earlier that day.

#### 4.2.3 Observation III: Car Talk, Pt. 1

The third and fourth installments of the observation phase provided an opportunity not only to compare single- and mixed-gender conversation, but also to examine how the same topic is spoken about in both situations. To put it into context, the third observation occurred after Participant 3's car was hit while it was parked on the street. Although no significant damage was done, it was the tipping point for the participant who was experiencing a stressful point in the semester. Additionally, the person who hit her car was known to the participants and they were generally not fond of him. This 20 minute long conversation took place between Participants 1, 3, 6, and 11 at their house, and the highlights are displayed in Figure 9.

**Figure 9.** Frequency of use by participant - observation III

*Participant 1*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0

*Participant 3*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
4	0	1	0	1	2	2	0	0	2	0

*Participant 6*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	1

*Participant 11*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
1	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	2

*Asshole* (7), *dick* (7), and *fuck* (5) appeared the most frequently in this conversation. There were no uses of *motherfucker*, *hell*, *cunt*, or *bastard*. *Asshole* occurred as *what an asshole*, *what a fucking asshole*, *he's such an asshole*, and *that asshole*. The one instance of *bitch* was self-referential on the part of Participant 3 (i.e., *I don't want to be a bitch, but...*). Variants of *damn* included *damn*, *that's shitty*, *goddammit*, and *damn girl*, while variants of *fuck* included *what the fuck* and *fucking a* and *pissed* occurred as *(so) pissed*. Additionally, *dick* is a play on the name of a male involved in this incident and everyone seems to derive some pleasure out of the

fact that *he's such a dick* and living up to his namesake, hence the increased frequency and 100% use rate.

#### 4.2.4 Observation IV: Car Talk, Pt. 2

The second portion of the car incident continued later that evening at a house the above participants frequently socialize at. This household has all male inhabitants, which provided a perfect opportunity to examine conversation between a proportion of my participants and their close male friends. Participants 3, 6, and 11 were present as well as four males. Participant 3 recounted her story for those present. It should be noted that one of the four males entered the conversation about 11 minutes and Participant 3 gave him a brief synopsis. The entirety of the conversation took place in a 27 minute window of time. Also, as I did not have the consent of the males present and as this is a study from the female perspective only, any linguistic data they provided will not be discussed here.

**Figure 10.** Frequency of use by participant - observation IV

*Participant 3*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
2	0	0	0	0	3	3	0	0	2	0

*Participant 6*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	0	0

*Participant 11*

<u>Asshole</u>	<u>Bastard</u>	<u>Bitch</u>	<u>Cunt</u>	<u>Damn</u>	<u>Dick</u>	<u>Fuck</u>	<u>Hell</u>	<u>Motherfucker</u>	<u>Piss</u>	<u>Shit</u>
2	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	2

Again, *asshole* (4), *dick* (7), and *fuck* (5) were the most frequently used, and *bastard*, *bitch*, *cunt*, *damn*, and *hell* were never uttered. Accounting for the fact that one of the original conversational participants was not present, the frequency of use is almost on par with the all female conversation.

## 5.0 Discussion

What does this tell us about college-aged women and swearing? If these results are any indication, women in this demographic are, in general, using a variety of swears frequently and

creatively. Is there any correlation, though, between how they perceive their use of and actually use swears on an individual basis? In order to determine this, participants must be looked at case-by-case. Unfortunately, not every questionnaire participant was able to be observed, but nine of the original eleven participated in at least one observation. Of the nine observed, seven reported frequently<sup>5</sup> using some of the swears on the list (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11.** Frequently used swears by observed participants

Participant	1	3	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Frequently Used Swears</b>	bitch shit fuck damn	hell shit fuck damn	bitch motherfucker fuck	hell shit piss damn	asshole shit fuck	hell bitch shit fuck damn dick bastard asshole	hell damn

*Fuck*, *shit*, and *damn* were the top three words listed as frequently used, followed by *hell* and *bitch*. As far as their reported usage versus actual usage was concerned, there are both similarities and discrepancies. For instance, Participant 1 used *fuck*, *shit*, and *damn* as they reported, but *bitch*, which they claimed to frequently use, was not used at all. *Asshole* and *dick* were unlikely to be used, but the participant used both when observed -- in fact, *asshole* was their most used swear. Additionally, the use of *piss* was reported as ‘extremely unlikely,’ but was also uttered by Participant 1.

This trend of mixed results between reported frequency of use versus actual frequency of use continued with the other participants. It should be noted, however, for the most part participants did not deny swearing frequently and were actually quite accurate about how often they swear, though they were often inaccurate about which swears they used. Participant 3 used a myriad of swears when she was observed: *fuck* and *damn* were reported to be frequently used and were used as such. *Hell* and *shit* were claimed to be frequently used but not used at all.

<sup>5</sup> Frequent = 7 or 6 on the Likert scale

*Asshole, dick, piss, bastard, bitch, and cunt* were reported as moderately used, and used by Participant 3 in each observation. Participants 7 and 8 only used *fuck* and *shit*, though Participant 7 claimed that she infrequently uses *fuck*, and *piss, damn, and hell*, which she reported as frequently using were never used at all. Also, Participant 8 never used *asshole*, though she said that she often uses it. Participant 9 only used two swears: *damn* and *motherfucker* but reported using *shit, hell, fuck, dick, asshole, bitch, and bastard* with equal frequency. Participants 6 and 10 also had similar results, where some words used match their reported frequency and some do not. These differences may be accounted for by the fact that the conversational contexts may have merited different words that were somehow more appropriate for the topic. For instance, if a participant claimed to infrequently use *bastard*, but that seemed the most appropriate at the time given the context, they may use it even if they do not regularly.

As the sample size was fairly small, any outliers really stood out. Participants 4 and 11 present much different stories than the other participants in the study. Participant 4 reported not swearing that often; in fact, the highest frequency rating she could give any one of the swears was a 4, which is considered 'neutral.' Her actual usage matched this. She only used *damn* once, which was the word she rated a 4, but otherwise, she never uttered another taboo when observed. Participant 11, on the other hand, rated all words as being infrequently or rarely used, but used *shit, fuck, dick, asshole, damn* and *hell* during her observations, which contradicts her perceived use. In fact, *shit, dick, asshole, and damn* were reported as extremely unlikely to be used, but *shit* was actually one of her most used words.

What could account for these outliers and discrepancies? In the case of Participant 4 I looked to her demographic information, which could differentiate her from the rest of the sample. To start, she is the youngest participant at 19 years old and only two years into university, which indicates that she has not been exposed to the same environment for as long as the other participants, whose average age is 21 years old. Additionally, she is one of two participants still affiliated with a religious organization and the only participant who is was raised a Roman Catholic and stayed Roman Catholic, so perhaps her religious affiliation has either decreased her lifetime access to these words or prohibits her from using vulgar, profane, or blasphemous language. Furthermore, I had asked participants to report their major study at

university to see if there were any differences or similarities across disciplines. While for the most part this does not appear to have much bearing on swear usage, Participant 4 is an elementary education major which indicates that her studies are centered around children, which may mean she is more conscious of so-called ‘dirty’ language. Finally, she, like other participants, reported that her parents do not swear that much around her, but she also indicated that her female friends rarely swear around her, unlike other participants. While she said that her male friends often swear around her and she sometimes swears around them, she was only observed in all-female conversations, which may support or be a reflection of her questionnaire answers.

Then there is the curious case of Participant 11. Her reported versus actual usage differed from one another. She claimed not to swear all that often, but actually swore quite a bit when observed. She does not have any demographic information that stands out that might explain her underestimation of her swearing use. She did report that her parents never swear around her and she never swears around them, which, if this is the context she was thinking of when answering the frequency questions, might explain her results. However, she does say that she sometimes swears around both male and female friends, so while she may not ‘frequently’ use the swears, perhaps in comfortable, social contexts she will let her guard down. Also of note, she is quoted as saying that she tries not to swear to “represent women well” but if she is swearing it is because the people she is speaking with “don’t care.” She was in a situation where she knew all of her conversation partners well and may think they “don’t care” so allowed herself to swear around them.

Overall, it appears that, while participants may not have been completely accurate about which swears they use, they overwhelmingly admitted that they do swear, and in the very few cases where they do not, there are fairly clear reasons why this might be so. Establishing that their perceived usage matches their actual usage is just the first step. Each participant did swear at least once -- how did the swears they used match up with their perceived offensiveness? For the most part participants used a mix of very, moderate, and less offensive words with no clear correlation between swears they said and their reported offensiveness. There were also some participants who used words they deemed ‘very offensive’ the most frequently. Participant 11, in

addition to claiming to not use swears but did anyway, reported *shit* and *dick* as being ‘very offensive’ and used both the most in all observations, even over *hell*, *damn*, *fuck*, and *asshole*, which she reported as the least offensive words. Participant 10 only used *bitch* and rated it as ‘very offensive;’ *motherfucker* was one of two words used by Participant 9, who rated this as ‘very offensive’ as well. Participant 1 had a similar situation with *asshole* and *piss*. Unsurprisingly, all participants (except Participant 11, who viewed it as not that offensive) said that *cunt* was the most offensive word and as such did not use it. Participant 3, however, was an exception to this. While she, too, said that *cunt* was very offensive, she actually used it in one of the observations, despite a universally<sup>6</sup> agreed upon perception of offensiveness by all of her conversation mates. Participants 7 and 8 only used words that they rated as moderate to less offensive, while Participant 4 only used a less offensive word. These mixed results indicate that there is no necessary correlation between participants’ perception of offensiveness and the likelihood that they will use a word.

As far as perception of usage in mixed-gender contexts compared to their actual usage goes, there is little difference here, as well. Only three participants, unfortunately, could be observed in both female only and mixed-gender conversations, but these discussions revolved around the same topic, so the two were able to be compared. The number of individual utterances of swears per participant almost exactly matched between the two conversations. Participant 3 said 12 swears in the all female context and 10 in mixed-gender. Participant 6 used swears 5 times with all females, and 4 times in mixed-gender conversation, while Participant 11 swore 7 times in both cases. In addition to there being no significant difference between the two, there was also little difference between their perception of use in mixed-gender contexts versus single-gender. Participant 3 reported that she swears ‘often’ around both her male and female friends and believes that men and women swear equally. She does say that she’s more conscious of swearing around male friends because she wants to be perceived as “one of the guys’ but she “usually swear[s] in casual conversations anyway.” Participant 6 also reports swearing ‘often’ around male and female friends and is not more conscious of swearing around the opposite

---

<sup>6</sup> Though there is little information by way of peer-reviewed sources regarding this, *cunt* is popularly regarded as the most offensive word in the English lexicon. The Oxford English Dictionary describes it as “the English word most avoided as taboo.” (OED Online, 2015).

gender. Participant 11, too, is not conscious of swearing around the opposite gender, though she “tries to represent women well by being well spoken” (i.e., not swearing as much) but will swear around people she knows (i.e., if she is comfortable enough she will swear, regardless of the gender of her listeners). She also reports swearing equally around both male and female friends.

### *5.1 Improvements to Current Study*

Although the findings generally support my hypothesis, there are many improvements that could increase the validity of the study. First, a larger sample size would make this evidence much easier to extrapolate from, though the issue of the observer and participants knowing each other would come into play in a larger study. Perhaps multiple female researchers could work on this project with their own social groups in order to keep the sense of comfort and familiarity in the observation phase of the study. Additionally, it would have been ideal to have each participant observed in both single- and mixed-gender contexts to truly compare the two, but conflicting schedules prevented this from happening in a natural way. More mixed-gender contexts, especially if the topic had been the same between contexts as it was in Observations 3 and 4, would have also been better, but again scheduling and timing prevented this.

As far as the questionnaire is concerned, rating frequency and offensiveness on the same scale (i.e., both seven point or ten point) would have made comparison between the two easier. Also, conducting more formal interviews of each participant, rather than having them answer questions on paper or online may have gleaned more insight into their actual perception. It is easy to not answer questions or give minimal responses when you are not being held verbally accountable, but if I had performed face-to-face interviews perhaps I would have more detailed responses.

### *5.2 Suggestions for Further Study*

There are also a number of ways this study can be tweaked to gather data on other factors and taboo language; after all, this piece of research is a variation on Lakoff’s original proposal and multiple other studies that have also attempted to quantify her musings. One point of interest is the generation gap in swearing. Most participants reported that their mothers swear very little



around them, and likewise their daughters swear very little in return, though they swear more around females their own age. Perhaps Lakoff was right to a certain extent, in that the women she studied forty years ago did not swear as much. Studying middle-aged women versus college-aged women, for instance, might support the idea that there is a generational difference in frequency of swearing. The discrepancies between mother-daughter and friend-to-friend interactions may also rest on the relationship between speakers. Perhaps there is a different sense of respect between a parent and child than two friends, though there may be a similar comfort level or sense of familiarity. A study that centers on the interactions between females with different relationships to one another may also be another interesting line of research. Additionally, studying use of swearing in women across socioeconomic status, education level, religious background, race, or ethnicity may also glean relevant information on how identifying with various social groups can influence use of taboo or even what is considered taboo.

Along this same vein, this study could be adapted to gather data on what kinds of taboo are most frequently used. While I simply looked at offensiveness here, there are several types of taboo, from the religious to the scatological to the sexual, and different types may be used with varying frequency by different demographics, which could point toward what is considered taboo by various sectors of society. This could also be done with ‘gendered’ taboos, such as those regarding male and female genitalia, to keep along the lines of a gender study. In addition, while I conducted an observation of mixed-gender conversation, I did not gather any data on the male participants. Comparing their perceived and actual use, as well as offensiveness ratings, could be as informative as studying female speech patterns has been.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Do college-aged women swear? Signs point to yes, refuting Lakoff’s claim that women avoid strong taboo language. It is safe to say that most of the words listed in this study could be considered strong and indeed were rated as ‘very offensive’ in many cases, but participants used them with seemingly few reservations anyway. In general, participants were forthcoming about their frequent usage of swears, though they were not always accurate about which swears they were most likely to use. Additionally, they seem not to mind using a mixture of less offensive to

very offensive taboos while in familiar social situations, regardless of the gender of the conversational participants. Whatever claims were made forty years ago regarding this particular aspect of so-called women's language, this current piece of research has, in some small way, shown that this is no longer the case.

## References

- Beers-Fägersten, K. (2007). A sociolinguistic analysis of swear word offensiveness. *Saarland Working Papers in Linguistics, 1*. 14-37.
- Beers-Fägersten, K. (2012). *Who's Swearing Now?: The Social Aspects of Conversational Swearing*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bradley, P.H. (1981). The folk-linguistics of women's speech: An empirical examination. *Communication Monographs, 48*. 73-90.
- Bucholtz, M. & Hall, K. (2012). Introduction: Twenty years after *Language and Woman's Place*. In M. Bucholtz & K. Hall (eds.) *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*. New York, NY: Routledge. 1-22.
- Cameron, D., McAlinden, F. & O'Leary, K. (1988). Lakoff in context: the social and linguistic functions of tag questions. In J. Coates and D. Cameron (eds.) *Women in Their Speech Communities: New Perspectives on Language and Sex*. London, UK: Longman. 74-93.
- Coates, J. (2004). *Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited.
- De Klerk, V. (1992). How taboo are taboo words for girls?. *Language in Society, 21*. 277-289.
- DuBois, B. & Crouch, I. (1975). The question of tag questions in women's speech: They don't really use more of them, do they? *Language in Society, 4*. 289-94.
- Eckert, P. & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2003). *Language and Gender*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fasold, R. (1990). *The Sociolinguistics of Language*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- James, D. & Clarke, S. (1993). Women, men, and interruptions: A critical review. In D. Tannen (ed.) *Gender and conversational interaction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Jay, T. (1992). Chapter 4: The Frequency of Dirty Word Usage. In T. Jay (ed.) *Cursing in America* (111-157). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Jay, T. (2009). The utility and ubiquity of taboo words. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 4*. 153-161.
- Lakoff, R. (1973). Language and woman's place. *Language in Society, 2*, 45-80.
- Thorne, B. (1976). Review of *Language and Woman's Place*. *Signs, 1*. 744 - 46.
- Timm, L. (1976). Review of *Language and Woman's Place*. *Lingua, 39*. 244-52.
- Van Herk, G. (2012). Gender and identity. In G. Van Herk (ed.) *What is Sociolinguistics?*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 85 - 103.

Appendix A  
Self-Report Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions as accurately as possible. If at any point you wish to refrain from answering a question, feel free to do so.

**Part I: Demographic Information**

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What year are you at university? (circle one) 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup>
3. What are you studying? \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. What is your father's highest level of education? (check one)  
 High school diploma or equivalent (GED)  
 Some college, no degree  
 Vocational/technical school (2 year program)  
 Bachelor's degree  
 Master's degree  
 Doctoral degree  
 Professional degree (MD, JD, etc.)  
 Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. What is your mother's highest level of education? (check one)  
 High school diploma or equivalent (GED)  
 Some college, no degree  
 Vocational/technical school (2 year program)  
 Bachelor's degree  
 Master's degree  
 Doctoral degree  
 Professional degree (MD, JD, etc.)  
 Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. What is your father's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What is your mother's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
  
8. Do you have any siblings? (circle one) Yes No  
    a. If so, please list the age and gender of each (i.e., male-18, female-22; no names, please).
  
9. Were you raised to practice an organized religion? (circle one) Yes No  
    a. If 'yes,' which one? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Are you currently affiliated with an organized religion? (circle one) Yes No  
    a. If 'yes,' which one? \_\_\_\_\_

**Part II: Frequency & Context of Usage**

1. Please give an example sentence that is most representative of your common use of each of the following words (if applicable). If you would use the term on its own as an interjection (e.g., ‘Fuck!’), please also indicate that:

Asshole

Bastard

Bitch

Cunt

Damn

Dick

Fuck

Hell

Motherfucker

Piss

Shit

2. For each of the following words, please indicate your likelihood use them throughout the day (circle one):

	Extremely Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Some what Likely	Extremely Likely
Asshole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Bastard	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Bitch	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Cunt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Damn	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Dick	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Fuck	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Hell	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Motherfucker	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Piss	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Shit                    1                    2                    3                    4                    5                    6                    7

**Part II: Usage & Exposure**

1. Does your **father** use swears when he speaks to you? (circle one)

Often                    Sometimes                    Rarely                    Never

2. Do you use swears around your **father**? (circle one)

Often                    Sometimes                    Rarely                    Never

3. Does your **mother** use swears when she speaks to you? (circle one)

Often                    Sometimes                    Rarely                    Never

4. Do you use swears around your **mother**? (circle one)

Often                    Sometimes                    Rarely                    Never

5. Do your **female** friends use swears when they speak to you? (circle one)

Often                    Sometimes                    Rarely                    Never

6. Do your **male** friends use swears when they speak to you? (circle one)

Often                    Sometimes                    Rarely                    Never

7. Do you use swear words when you speak to your **female** friends? (circle one)

Often                    Sometimes                    Rarely                    Never

8. Do you use swear words when you speak to your **male** friends? (circle one)

Often                    Sometimes                    Rarely                    Never

9. Are you more conscious of swearing when you are around people of the opposite gender?

Yes No

If yes, please briefly explain why.

10. Do you think men swear more often than women?

Yes                    No, it's about equal                    No, women swear more often than men

## Part IV: Ratings

Each of the following words may or may not be considered offensive and to varying degrees.

Using the scale provided, please indicate how offensive or inoffensive each word is to you (based on your personal belief of offensiveness, not how you believe others view them or how you think society would dictate your opinion of them).

	Not Offensive					Very Offensive				
Asshole	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Bastard	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Bitch	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Cunt	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Damn	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Dick	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Fuck	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Hell	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Motherfucker	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Piss	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Shit	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Are there any words you think should have been included in this list?

Appendix B  
Demographic Information by Participant

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Year at University</b>	<b>Major</b>
<b>1</b>	22	4th	Psychology/Justice Studies
<b>2</b>	21	3rd	Environmental Science
<b>3</b>	22	4th	English
<b>4</b>	19	2nd	Elementary Education
<b>5</b>	22	4th	Outdoor Education
<b>6</b>	20	3rd	Neuroscience & Behavior
<b>7</b>	20	4th	English and Music
<b>8</b>	21	3rd	Psychology
<b>9</b>	20	2nd	Environmental Conservation & Sustainability; minor in Music
<b>10</b>	21	4th	Neuroscience
<b>11</b>	23	4th	English/Education/Music

	<b>Father's education</b>	<b>Father's occupation</b>	<b>Mother's education</b>	<b>Mother's occupation</b>	<b>Siblings: Age &amp; Gender</b>
<b>1</b>	Other	-----	High school diploma/GED	None	Female, 20
<b>2</b>	Bachelor's	Carpenter	High school diploma/GED	Educator	Male, 23
<b>3</b>	High school diploma/GED	General Manager	Some college, no degree	Bookkeeper	Female, 19
<b>4</b>	High school diploma/GED	Manager	Some college, no degree	Accounting	Female, 22



5	Bachelor's	Holds many jobs	Some college, no degree	Stay-at-home mother	Male, 25; Female, 28; Female, 30
6	Master's	Art teacher	Professional degree	Ophthalmologist	Female, 20; Male, 20; Female, 24
7	Some college, no degree	Business owner	High school diploma/GED	Stay-at-home mother	Female, 33; Male, 31; Female, 29; Female, 26; Male, 23; Male, 18; Male, 15; Male, 12
8	Other	Retired	Master's	Librarian	Male, 32
9	Some college, no degree	Carpenter/builder/small business owner	Bachelor's	Stay-at-home mother	Female, 25
10	Master's	Computer Programmer	Bachelor's	Teacher	Female, 27; Female, 29
11	Bachelor's	Engineer	Other	Nurse	Male, 26; Female, 21

	<b>Raised with a religion?</b>	<b>Which?</b>	<b>Currently affiliated with a religion?</b>	<b>Which?</b>
1	No	----	No	----
2	Yes	Protestant Christianity	No	----
3	Yes	Roman Catholicism	No	----
4	Yes	Roman Catholicism	Yes	Roman Catholicism
5	Yes	Christianity	No	----
6	No	----	No	----
7	Yes	Roman Catholicism	No	----
8	Yes	Roman Catholicism	No	----
9	No	----	No	----

<b>10</b>	No	----	Yes	Unitarian Universalism
<b>11</b>	No	----	No	----