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ENGL 110C

IMRAD Paper: Taboo Words

2/14/20

Cunt, Derogatory or Uplifting?

1.0 Introduction

Many individuals around the world have grown up to listening and speaking taboo words typically out of the norm. “According to Timothy Jay, in his article, “The Utility and Ubiquity of Taboo Words”, “Taboo words can be used to achieve a variety of personal and interpersonal outcomes that may be positive, negative, or inconsequential in terms of their impact on others, although some might argue all uses of taboo words are harmful to some degree”. Americans use various taboo words interchangeably to swearing daily, however, each word tends to carry out a different meaning or use. For example, one may find the b word as offensive, whereas someone else interprets it as a “female dog, wolf, fox, or otter” according to the Lexico dictionary. The taboo or vulgar word, “cunt” is defined as the “female genital organs” or as “disparaging and obscene” according to Merriam Webster. “Cunt” is a word used worldwide and takes effect on many individuals both female and male socially and psychologically wellbeing.

1.1 Background

Taboo words or swear words have been around since the 1400s and today they are used every day in the English language that can either describe an individual’s emotions in a negative or even a positive way. To initiate a study on this taboo word, it was important to ask different participants, “What effect does being called a cunt have on males and females?” The effect would play a vital role to this research study because there are many different opinions that were given after being asked this specific question. In order to reduce the risk of gender bias, it was important to see both standpoints to make this study more effective and reliable in a way.

1.2 Thesis Statement/Research Question

What effect does the taboo word “cunt” take on different individuals?

2.0 Literature Review

Swear words are considered as the social phenomenon as many people use it in their daily language. Hugh Rawson’s Dictionary of Invective conducted a study (1987) on various taboo words in the English language. Within this book, he addresses the word cunt and describes the details surrounding it such as how the “word may be employed in a strictly anatomical sense or as a term of abuse for a person”. Within this book, Rawson points out the various way’s cunt has been used centuries ago, dating back to when the word was first used in 1230. This word was not only used in language, but it has also tied into literature such as Shakespeare. One work was conducted by Germaine Greer who appealed to the women’s movement and pressed “women to confront men with their sexuality”. She questioned various individuals on the streets of London to see how it affected women and men. However, to Greer, in the 1970s, it strongly felt like it should be more of an everyday word and not seen as an offensive and derogatory word. With various meanings to the word cunt, she dives deep into various languages such as old Dutch and Scandinavian to develop a better understanding of the word to show the true significance of the word.

In 2017, Sara Radin, a culture writer and editor issued an article titled, “CUNT: Understanding the Contemporary & Cultural Perception of a Word”, where she asks a woman named Georgina Johnson who recently published a project titled “CUNT”. Johnson created this project to change the stigmatic approach around the word cunt to a more positive uplifting approach for women. In Kory Stamper’s book, “Word by Word”, Stamper mentions a statement by Freeman that states that “a woman should be proud to declare she is a Bitch… because Bitch is beautiful. It should be an act of affirmation by self and not negation by others. This statement was interesting because such a known derogatory word was a statement of positivity of oneself. In many other opinions, one may assume that this other taboo word is considered negative while others out in the world consider it to be of the norm. Stamper also wrote, “what my granny thinks is taboo language is different from what I think is taboo language”. He also states that … what is indecent to one person in one context is perfectly fine to that same person in another context. This quote helped to understand the overall picture of the actual word, “cunt”.

The purpose of this research is to display and discover the various attitudes and opinions towards the well-known degrading word, “cunt”. This research was important to conduct because of the various opinions people have towards this word. Cunt is vulgar as others might see it as a description of something potentially beautiful. As Georgina Johnson stated in her project, Cunt used to mean “Goddess in ancient Indian culture” and it started up a conversation with various women and the words used to describe themselves. The hypothesis conducted is that females will find the taboo word cunt more offensive than men will.

Overall comparing both articles to the individual study conducted this research study, they have demonstrated an understanding of the word cunt and clearly states the study’s results towards the end. Each study showed their own opinion towards the matter especially the study by Germaine Greer who saw how many individuals saw that using the word cunt did not really have an effect on anyone, seen as not bad, and also seen as a word that possibly should not be used at all because of the negative connotation it has on women.

3.0 Methods

3.1 Description of Research Tools

Prior to testing out the hypothesis, it was important to gather intel on the actual word to get a better insight of the meaning. The extensive research conducted would potentially help conclude the overall results at the end. Conducting an interview was used to do this research to get males and females specific opinions on the taboo word, cunt.

3.2 Description of Participants

The participants used in the study were two males and two females, age 18+, African American and Caucasian, college students. Seeing that using tightly grouped individuals without much difference helped to make the research study more closely related and not so diverse. Keeping it related helped make it easier and more accurate without various variables.

3.3 Description of Data Collection

The field research was completed on the 23rd of January by getting two females and two males to answer a research question. This research was conducted in person on Old Dominion campus by finding these known individuals and sitting down to talk with them about this question. Writing down their statements before they went off to class was the best way to organize information to include in the study.

4.0 Results

After completing the study, it was interesting to find out that the hypothesis was in fact, incorrect. Assuming women would have a different opinion versus the males, they instead were very similar. Although the word is directed towards women more, women did not seem to have an issue with the word as much as expected. Males found the word to be humorous and not that serious. Two males were asked for this research and were asked how they would feel if anyone ever called them a cunt? Interesting enough, both males explained that they did not seem to care or even considered themselves as unaffiliated with this word. One male stated, “it is like any other bad word to me…cunt is not that bad, in fact it is sort of funny in my opinion”. This male seemed to have their own meaning of the word and did not find it attached to a derogatory word towards women. The other male asked the same question stating, “it shouldn’t be disturbing. It's just slang for vagina”.

Two females were then asked the same exact question, and this was going to tie up the study. One female explained that “cunt” is bad, but it does not necessarily affect them in any kind of way because it is only a word. Comparing the female’s responses to a more feminist book, “Word Slut: A Feminist Guide to Taking Back the English Language” by Amanda Montell, the results differed in some ways and connected in others. On page 48, Montell states, “… because a society that’s more equal is also one that’s more relaxed” …the word offense itself will become obsolete.” This statement was important to tie into the female’s responses because it shows how normalizing a word could potentially affect a society. Montell also included various questions she began to ponder about such as, “Why is singling out a person’s gender through language so important to us?”. Singling out a person’s gender through language or even a word has been occurring in America for generations that now, in society, it is considered normal in a way.

5.0 Discussion

Overall, the results were unexpected and very similar from the males to the females. It was challenging to get to the participants to go into more depth about their opinions of the taboo word because they were very blunt about how it is only a word and means nothing more. Finding ways to make the study more interesting could have been changed to affect the outcome possibly such as actually calling individuals. Having more people to interview could have effected the outcomes of the study due to the fact that there are a lot of other individuals with different mindsets that could have altered the study and the hypothesis conducted may have been set out to be proven true based on majority votes against or for the taboo word.

6.0 Works Cited

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Participant B. Personal Interview. January 2020.

Participant C. Personal Interview. January 2020.

Participant D. Personal Interview. January 2020.

7.0 Reflection

After completing this report, the introduction was my strongest part where I demonstrated my best writing by considering all factors in a good and effective introduction paragraph to ensure that the reader would be drawn to the paper and understand what I would be discussing throughout the paper. It was very hard to find exact case studies on the actual word “cunt” without having to go through someone else’s article. I wanted to ensure this paper was as accurate as possible to clarify my intentions for this research study and why I chose this word. The hardest part about this paper was coming up with a path and continue writing about something so specific. This taboo word is not typically all over the internet, so I had to dig deep into the internet to find credible enough sources to use in the paper. It was also very tempting to go on a rant about how taboo words originated but I knew I had to focus on the actual study and more about the feelings instead of the history or origin of the word. Looking over the final paper, it would have been easier if I would have ensured that my paragraphs were not overlapping with one another and it was structured well enough to help the flow of the paper go smoothly. Making sure I had a thought-out process is something that I would have done differently to keep the paper flowing good enough to make the reader think about why I chose this word. I need to work on how I structure my sentences as well as staying on track within each paragraph so that it is not all over the place and confusing. In order to improve, I know that creating more brainstorms before I begin could potentially help me in the long run for the rest of my future papers.