

When Moms Say Bad Words: Family and Peer Influence on the Frequency of Swearing

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ABSTRACT: Swearing is taboo in modern culture. Even though this habit is deemed negative, many people continue to swear frequently every day. The purpose of this study is to determine who exerts the most influence on one's swearing habits: one's family or one's peers? Seven hundred and sixty-three university students were asked via survey who (mother, father, siblings, friends, or peers) swore most frequently during their upbringing. These questions were compared through linear regression to measure participants' level of swearing. We anticipated that peers would have a more significant impact on one's swearing frequency. However, we found that an individual's mother had the highest correlational influence on swearing, although peers also had a significant relationship.

KEYWORDS: peers, family, swearing, influence

INTRODUCTION

From a young age, people are taught how to act properly to function in society. With “proper” being one end of the spectrum, the other end describes more shunned behaviors, such as the act of swearing or the use of taboo language.

Words considered taboo come from any of the following categories: offensive words and phrases, insults or name-calling, clinical terms, and abusive expressions (Jay & Jay, 2013). Humans living in modern society are bound to be exposed to this type of language throughout various aspects of life. Furthermore, this behavior raises the question as to which social settings have the most influence over how often individuals swear.

Language is used to express emotion, convey meaning, and to be understood. It is not surprising that anger and frustration often lead individuals to express themselves through the use of verbal aggression. In fact, Rassin and Muris (2005) found that the expression of negative emotions is the strongest reason for swearing. Patrick (1901) explored the use of profanity as the expression of anger, used also when one’s well-being is threatened.

Swearing is highly important to study, since such behavior can have negative effects. Although there are socially-acceptable times and places for swearing, in the professional realm it is generally taboo to swear. If one were to have a bad habit of using inappropriate words, and if this habit were carried into the work place, holding a job or attaining a good position might be difficult. In general, people do not want to work with an individual who is unable to demonstrate professionalism and maturity. If the influences of swearing are too strong on a person, he/she could experience challenges in life—especially regarding making a living and being self-sufficient. This outcome might be mitigated if the information on the causes of swearing were widely available.

At the same time, swearing is also important to study because, when used properly, swear words can have some positive effects on a person. Swearing has been shown to positively impact persuasion by increasing the speaker’s perceived depth of feeling (Scherer, 2007). In addition, swearing can reduce frustration and improve attitudes at times (Scherer, 2007). In a way, swearing is a type of catharsis when dealing with internal conflict (Patrick, 1901). Learning when the positive effects of swearing

will be attained over negative ones is a vital task.

Theoretical Perspective

The current study is grounded in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). According to this theory, behavior occurs through the acquisition of information from one’s external environment, specifically from other people. Social cognitive theory speculates that we learn behavior by observing the actions of others as well as the consequences associated with those actions. This theory applies to the learning and usage of swear words. Scherer and Rhodes (1987), for example, demonstrate that children are highly influenced by their peers when it comes to swearing. This conclusion is not surprising, since humans are frequently influenced by people in their everyday lives, with children being easily influenced. Influences tend to be even more prominent when the influencer is another peer, instead of a family member or older figure in a child’s life. This phenomenon is known as peer pressure. The changes an individual goes through during adolescence, neurobehaviorally and psychosocially, affects one’s functioning and can result in a desire to conform to the actions, beliefs, or ways of one’s peers (Burkhart, 2011). Peer pressure takes predominance over cognitive impulses and sometimes is unable to override one’s self-control (Burkhart, 2011).

Recent research shows that even preschool children conform to peer pressure. Haun and Tomasello (2011) studied 24 groups of 4 children between 4 and 9 years of age. Their results show that young children often make judgments according to the decisions of the other children in their group. This research indicates that sensitivity to peers in a social setting is a crucial factor in one’s behavior at a very young age. In addition, young children are sensitive to information provided by adults—such as which words are okay to say and which words are off limits, although strong conformity to peers’ behavior, even when the child knows better, has been recorded in school-age kids (Haun & Tomasello, 2011).

The Current Study

The present study hypothesizes that frequent exposure to swear words from one’s peers has a greater impact regarding one’s swearing habits than early exposure to swear words from family members. We reach this conclusion because students tend to be surrounded by friends and peers more than anyone else. Therefore, the current study explores whether vocabulary and swearing

usage is shaped more by one's peers than by one's family.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

This study was part of a larger study on the factors related to the use of profanity. Data was originally collected from 818 undergraduate students from a large diverse southeastern public research university. Participants were recruited through psychology courses and received research credit or class extra credit for their participation. All participants read an explanation of research prior to completing the online questionnaire and took on average 27.25 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Participants were first asked questions about their personality characteristics, religiosity, swearing exposure, swearing history, and attitudes regarding swearing, followed by general demographic questions.

A total of 55 participants were deleted from analyses in the original study because their responses indicated that they were not involved with the survey or they did not answer important questions in the study. Specifically, participants who were deleted completed the survey outside of one standard deviation of the mean participation time. Some completed the survey in such a short period of time (e.g. five minutes) that it was impossible for them to have completed the survey correctly. Also, in some of the open-ended questions, some participants entered curse words for answers because they did not take the study seriously.

The subset of participants assessed in this study includes 763 participants for whom complete data was available regarding peer and family influences on swearing. Four hundred and eighty-five participants were from married households (63.6%) while the remaining participants were from divorced ($n = 130$, 17.0%), remarried ($n = 96$, 12.6%), and never married homes ($n = 52$, 6.8%). The majority of participants were female ($n = 501$, 65.7%) and identified as white ($n = 571$, 74.8%). One hundred and forty-five participants identified as Hispanic (19%). The mean age of all participants was 19.79, the standard deviation was 3.95, and the range was 30.

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants were asked four questions to assess their age,

ethnic origin, sex, and biological parents' relationship status.

Swearing Exposure Questionnaire

Five questions, adapted from Mokbel and Wright (2013), were used to determine the level of exposure to swear words while growing up from family (i.e., mother, father, siblings) or social factors (i.e., friends, peers). Response options ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*almost always*). These items were reverse coded prior to analysis. Alpha reliability for this scale was 0.77 in the current study. An alpha level of 0.70 or higher is generally considered acceptable in research. Therefore, the reliability of 0.77 is considered acceptable (George & Mallery, 2003).

Age of Exposure Questionnaire

Participants answered five questions regarding what age they were first exposed to swear words from their mom, dad, grandparents, friends, and peers. These items were reverse coded prior to analysis. Alpha reliability for this scale was 0.66. While 0.66 is a lower than desired reliability score, it was deemed acceptable in this study, as little to no research in this area has been conducted to date (George & Mallery, 2003).

History of Swearing Questionnaire

Participants were also required to answer thirteen questions relating to one's personal history of swearing, such as how old they were, whom they were with, and where they were when they said their first swear word.

RESULTS

We conducted preliminary analyses to assess the reliability, distributional characteristics, and intercorrelations of measures and the extent of missing data. Analyses indicated that missing data for the current study was less than 3% missing. Therefore, we used a simple mean substitution imputation method (Kline, 2005). This method involves replacing the missing data with the overall mean value for the variable. There is the possibility that replacing missing data in this manner might distort the distribution of the data. However, a comparison of variable distributions before and after imputation indicated that this method had no detectable effect on the data. The new data set was used in analyses.

Analyses relevant to the study aims are described in the following sections. These include (a) descriptive statistics reporting swearing exposures and (b) linear regression analyses of the relation between family and social exposures to swearing usage.

Swearing Exposures

As can be seen in Table 1, participants reported that they heard their mother swear the most frequently while growing up. The mother was the primary source of swearing exposure not only from family sources (e.g., father, siblings) but also in comparison to peer sources of swearing exposure.

Peer and Family Influence on Swearing Usage

We conducted a linear regression analysis to determine how one's swearing usage is related to levels of exposure to peers' and family's swearing habits. The overall model was significant, $F(5, 757) = 12.72, p = .00, R^2 = .08$. The dependent variable measuring how frequently individuals swear was significant, based on exposure to swear words from one's mother— $t(5,757) = -6.89, p < .001$ —and peers: $t(5,757) = -2.56, p = .01$. Exposure from friends, siblings, and one's father was not significant. In other words, our results show that the more an individual is exposed to swearing from one's peers, the more often one swears. The same conclusion holds true regarding exposure from one's mother. The overall model accounted for eight percent of the variance in swearing frequency, influenced by mother or peers. Results of our regression analyses can be found in Table 2.

DISCUSSION

Support for Hypothesis

The purpose of this study is to analyze whether family or peers exert the most influence on one's level of swearing. We hypothesized that peers are more influential regarding a person's swearing habits. Our results show that exposure from both one's mother and one's peers is significant in determining an individual's swearing frequency. While the influence of peers on how often an individual swears is strongly correlated, the influence of one's mother is even more strongly correlated. Therefore, our study generated a surprising and unexpected result.

Fu (2015) studied mother-child attachment influences on behavior problems in preschool and found an

interesting effect. Those with insecure or unhealthy mother-child relationships had higher levels of conflict than individuals who possessed secure mother-child attachments. The conflict was associated with a high level of externalizing problems (Fu, 2015). This research reflects the importance of one's mother regarding behavior. For instance, a child whose mother does not specify words that are not okay to say, and perhaps does not discipline when those words are said, will be more likely to act out and use inappropriate language. In contrast, if a mother instills appropriate language into her child, and punishes the child in a healthy way when rules are broken, the child will most likely behave properly and be less likely to use taboo language.

Nevertheless, although the relationship between a mother and child is crucial in many aspects, especially on behavior, attachment alone is enough to influence whether or not children act undesirably. Research by Mirjami et al. (2015) supports such an assertion. Shared pleasure was studied in 58 two-month olds and their mothers. The correlation between measured pleasure and behavioral problems at two years old was then examined. The infants who had longer face-to-face interaction with their mother, and higher levels of pleasure, showed fewer external problems in behavior at the two-year mark (Mirjami, et al., 2015). Evidence that mother-child relationships strongly foster positive psychological development, even in infancy may help explain the results from our study. From the very beginning, our mothers exert significant influence over our lives.

A study performed by Scherer and Rhodes (1987) reports that pupils' swearing habits did not increase during break time as originally predicted. The staff at a particular school observed students during break times in an unobtrusive manner. They discovered that, on average, one of the pupils would swear once out of every ten break times. These results included the only day that the pupils' swearing usage greatly increased, suggesting the pupils were influenced by one another. Although the pupils could have been slightly influenced by one another, this study sheds light on our results that peer influence is not as significant as originally predicted.

Limitations of Study

This study was comprised solely of university students, so the results may not be generalized. In addition, the majority of participants were female, so the results may be skewed due to the lower rate of male participation

in our study. Therefore, at best, our results can only be confidently applied to female university students in the age range of 18-25 years old. Furthermore, the method of data collection also limits the significance of this study's results. Participants were measured via survey on the online SONA System, which awards credit for general psychology courses in return for participation. Since the test was not conducted in a lab with a researcher present, there could be no control over the honesty of participants' answers, the amount of effort put into the survey, what participants were doing while taking the survey, or their mental state at the time of completion. The biggest limitation is perhaps the retrospective nature of this study. Honest reporting, memory failure, and inaccurate self-perception could bias the responses gathered.

Also, our initial hypothesis that peers exert more influence than parents regarding swearing habits stems from evidence that adolescents are especially susceptible to peer pressure (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). However, after peaking around age 14, that susceptibility declines. Data from Steinberg and Monahan (2007) include samples of 3,600 males and females, ages 10-30. Results show that resistance to peer pressure increases between ages 14-18. For this reason, the results of our study are understandable. Participants were all undergraduate students, with an average age of about 19. By this age, the effects of peer pressure on an individual have waned. Had our study included people in middle school and high school, the results could have been different—due to the stronger force peer pressure has on individuals in such an age range. At younger ages, peer pressure could influence swearing habits more so than one's mother—the opposite of what has been found for individuals ages 19 and up. In addition, basing our hypothesis solely on social cognitive theory limited our ability to see confounding variables—such as attachment theory and how insecure attachments play a role in one's swearing habits.

CONCLUSION

Our research is important because language is a crucial part of life. The exposure individuals have to swear words will shape the language they adopt in the long run. This point should be kept in mind during the development process of all children. Having the knowledge of what most influences taboo language may help prevent or manage a child's behavior.

Future Research

Future research on this topic should include a population comprised of equal gender distribution in order to account for that confounding variable. In addition, it would be beneficial to gather participants outside of the college setting, in order for results to be applied to the overall population. The idea that children are usually not surprised when their father swears, as opposed to the shock when mom swears, could be studied to assess gender differences related to what is perceived as socially acceptable swearing behavior.

To offset the issues of faulty memory, incorrect self-reporting of swearing usage, and responses with the intention to enhance one's self image, a longitudinal study with outside observation should be completed to avoid relying on subjective self-reporting. Other studies could focus on swearing alternatively defined compared to our study. Since the concept of swearing and how it is socially understood changes with time, this could be an avenue of future exploration. Whether peers or mothers influence individuals' swearing habits the most, such information can be made available in schools, clinics, and parenting-related literature to better understand the incidence of undesirable language or behavior in children.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Swearing Exposures

Note: data represents those who participants heard swear most frequently

Source	% (n)
Family: Mother	64.5 (492)
Father	4.6 (35)
Sibling(s)	6.9 (53)
Social: Friends	2.8 (21)
Peers	5.5 (42)

Table 2: Regression Analysis Summary for Friends and Family Members' Swearing to Predict Current Level of Swearing

	<i>p</i> -values	<i>t</i> -scores	Beta Weights
Mother	.00*	-6.89*	-.24*
Father	.65	-.461	-.02
Friends	.60	.035	-.02
Peers	.01*	-2.56*	-.09*
Siblings	.97	.035	.001
<i>R</i> ²			.08
<i>F</i>			12.72*

**p* < .05

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