Women and their Use of the Word Bitch

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Abstract

This study was designed to study the use of the word “bitch” in conversation between female friends. Female participants (N = 48) completed a questionnaire that consisted of 15 questions designed to investigate how females use the word “bitch”. Using a t-test, it was found that females most often use the word with close friends (p < .05). The results for why this phenomenon occurred are not clear from this research.
Women and their Use of the Word Bitch

Although the word *bitch* has a negative connotation, the word is sometimes used among close friends to refer to one another. Gallahorn (1971) have found, when studying psychiatric personnel, that they tend to swear more in general when they felt tense. The word *bitch* was tended to be one of the more frequently used words that they used. Tension could be a reason why women are referring to other women as bitches but it is not the only reason. The author has observed that women have been found to call their best friends bitches, but in a positive way. Jaworska, and Krishnamurthy (2012) say that the relationship between the people and the context the word is in makes all the difference when calling someone a bitch. Who says the word, the tone of voice that they use, and what they are saying are all important factors in deciding whether the word is insulting or not. The purpose of the word could be to insult someone. However, it could be used in a more positive way, indicating a close friendship.

The term *bitch* is generally seen as a negative word. It is seen as offensive and keeps women from gaining full equality. Coyne, Sherman, & O’Brian, (1978) say that language such the word *bitch* can help reinforce sex-role stereotypes. One function of gender specific derogatory terms is that they may keep women in roles that are considered to be lesser than a man and it could reinforce the inequality that many women have fought to overcome. Katila and Meriläinen (2002) say that the stereotypical gender positions for women are nice girls, seducers, and beautiful. Coyne, et al. (1978) has found that when a woman breaks from one of these positions then that woman could be considered a bitch. When a woman no longer acts docile or is not trying to please a man then some people may think of her as a bitch.
However, *bitch* is a much more complicated word than one might think. “Bitch” has had a complex history over the years. The word *bitch* used to mean a female dog in heat. It then took on the derogatory meaning of comparing women to these aforementioned dogs. Today it can still mean those things, but Bayley (2011) tells us that it can also mean a strong and independent woman, and some women tend to identify themselves in this manner. In the 1700’s the word bitch was aimed mostly at men in order to humiliate them by referring to them as women in very derogatory fashion. The word was also used to refer to a female dog. In 1920s the word took on the negative connotation that is known to us today. This was also the time of the women’s suffrage movement. The gains in legal rights that women received seemed to threaten men and the power that they held which in turn led to an increase in the use of the word *bitch* to describe a woman outnumber the amount the word was originally used for, a female dog in heat (Bayley, 2011). Starting in the 60’s, feminists started to refer to themselves as bitches and started viewing the word in a more positive light. One interpretation of this is that women started to reclaim the word. These women are proud to be called a bitch because they define the word being an achievement. It means that they are assertive and do not need to rely on others to support them (Bayley, 2011).

Today, as Schneider (2011) says, the word *bitch* is a part of pop culture. It is everywhere; in music, especially rap, television, and other sources of mass media. While some people still find the word *bitch* offensive, others, especially women, are using it in a more free manner. This free usage of the word could come from the strong connections that women create when they talk to each other. Coates (1997), and Sortirin and Gottfried (1999) both say that when women use the word *bitch* with each other it creates an intimacy between them. Women will form connections with each other because they feel comfortable saying this sometimes negative
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word to each other and they will not get offended. When one person in a friendship starts using the word bitch then the other women will most likely start to use the word too. When the word became so common place, it lost a lot of its negative connotations. This goes back to reclaiming the word. If more women are using the word *bitch* in a positive way, then the word becomes more okay to say. If a word is not viewed to be bad then people will use the word more freely, so then the word becomes more common. This could be what is happening with the word *bitch*.

This is similar to the situation of African Americans and the n-word. The n-word was first used as derogatory word to refer to black slaves in America. It gave the white slave owners power over their slaves. The n-word is still a very controversial term today, but some African Americans have reclaimed the word. The African Americans who have reclaimed the word have made it part of their every day vocabulary. Low (2007) says that although there are places where the n-word is still not used, school or work, there are places in pop culture where the word is more common: hip-hop music, poetry slams, and some forms of media. Motley, & Craig-Henderson (2007) say that the people who use the n-word publically view the word as a term of endearment or empowerment. However, there are unspoken rules of when and when not to use it. If the word is used within an in-group then the word can be used as a greeting, endearment, or sign of respect. If the word is targeted at an out-group then the word is often seen as an insult or a threat (Motley, et al., 2007). They also stress that it is all about intent when it comes to a word. It is not what a person says but how it is said.

Women could be doing this very same thing; they could be reclaiming *bitch*. They may use the word *bitch* to refer to friends because they have reclaimed the word. It has become more common because of this reclamation and the commonness itself that makes the word less shocking.
The intimate friendships that women share with each other could provide a barrier to any negative connotations that the word *bitch* holds. One reason why women may use the word *bitch* to refer to friends is there is a mutual understanding that there is no malicious intent behind the word when it comes from a close friend. Friends should trust each other because they have built up a lot of time and trust in their relationship. When one close friend calls another close friend a *bitch*, the second friend should know that the first friend was joking because of the level of trust that the friends have built up. The word *bitch* still carries some tension with it because it can be negative. A reason why someone may get offended when an acquaintance calls them a *bitch* is because that person may not be sure that there is no malicious intent behind the word as they would be with a close friend. That relationship may not be strong enough yet. An acquaintance is still not fully in the in-group yet, so if an acquaintance uses the word there could be doubt about it being a joke.

I expect that close friends will use the word *bitch* more than women who are just acquaintances. I believe that this will happen because of an increased comfort level between the two people. This comfort level will allow the other person to know that when a close friend calls them a *bitch* that they are only teasing and it will be a common word used among them. For women who use the word *bitch*, the use can signal a bond between the friends because they know that the intent is not negative.

To test this theory, a survey was distributed, and 48 women responded. Women were asked questions about their use of the word *bitch*. Questions pertained to how they feel about the word, whom they use the word with, and how they used the word.

**Method**
Participants

A convenience sample of 48 female students from Hanover College was obtained. Participants were females from Hanover College in Hanover, Indiana. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old. Participants were 94% Caucasian and 6% were non-white. Participants in this study were voluntary and some received extra credit for a class for participating.

Materials

The materials used for this survey were an online questionnaire, an online informed consent form, and a debriefing form. The online survey consisted of 12 questions pertaining to how females use the word *bitch* with each other; who they use the word with; and how they feel about the word (see Appendix for a complete copy of the interview questions used). Questions one through eleven are on a five-point Likert Scale. The twelfth question is an open ended question asking “Why do you think one friend would call another friend a bitch?”

One question asked the participant if she used the word bitch. Three questions were asked to see how the participants use the word. This was to test if women are using the word more positively or negatively. An example of this is “Have you ever called someone a bitch with the intention to hurt them?” Three questions asked about whom the participants used the word with. This was to test if women use the word *bitch* more with their friends, acquaintances, or enemies. An example of this type of question is “How often do you call an enemy a bitch?” Five questions were asked about how the participant feels about saying the word or the word being said to them. This is to test who comfortable women felt about the word in different scenarios. An example of this is “Would you be offended if a close friend called you a bitch?” At the end of these questions are three demographic questions asking the participants’ grade in
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school, race, and gender. Even though all of the participants should be female, the gender question is on there to make sure that only females have participated in the study.

**Procedure**

Participants were randomly selected from the student email directory. Every twentieth female was chosen from the Hanover email directory. An email asking the female to participate and a link to the survey were then sent to the participants. When the participant clicked on the link they were then directed to the informed consent form. By clicking the “Next” button the participant was agreeing that she had read the consent form and was willing to participate in this study. Once the participant finished all of the questions she was then directed to the debriefing form. The survey lasted around 15 minutes.

**Results**

First, simple statistical analyses were done in order to see how often participants use the word *bitch* in general and who the participants use the word with. Out of 48 participants, 73% use the word *bitch* in a moderate to very often frequency. This supports the idea that women are using the word on a frequent basis. 42.10% of participants use the word *bitch* in a joking way with their friends. Only 7.9% of participants call an acquaintance a bitch. Half of the participants call an enemy a bitch very often. This data show that people tend to use the word in one of two extreme forms; either jokingly with friends or very negatively with enemies. That negative connotation that started in the 1920s still lingers in society. However, the positive connotations that the feminists movement brought about are forming within some groups of women.
Correlations were then performed between some of the questions. A correlation of $r = .601$ was found between question three (Do you refer to your friends as *bitch* in a joking way?) and question six (Do your friends refer to you as a *bitch* in a joking way?) with a p-value < 0.001. This means that if you call your friends *bitch* in a joking way, then your friends are more likely to call you *bitch* in a joking way. This goes along with the in-group versus out-group situation. Friends use the word with each other and know that the other person is joking.

A correlation was then done between question three and question nine (How often do you call an acquaintance a *bitch*?) with $r = 0.005$ and $p = 0.976$. This means that just because participants used the word *bitch* with their friends, does not mean that they use it with acquaintances. The high p-value suggests that no matter how many times these two questions are asked, they will never be correlated. Participants do not use the word with acquaintances. However, there is some evidence that suggests that participants do use the word with people they consider their enemy. In a correlation between question three and question ten (How often do you call an enemy a *bitch*?), $r = 0.323$ and $p = 0.0509$. I have found a slight correlation between the two, further indicating the idea that people use the word *bitch* in two extremes: positively with friends or negatively with enemies.

Another correlation was run that tests the in-group versus out-group mentality. Question three was correlated with question 11 (Is it ok for a male to call a female a *bitch*?) with $r = 0.044$ and $p = 0.0792$. This indicates that when it comes to the word *bitch*, men are typically not included in the in-group. Based on this study, all I can do is speculate as to why this would be.

The last correlation that was done was between question seven (Would you be offended if a close friend called you a *bitch*?) and question three. Results show a negative correlation
between the questions, $r=-0.502$ and $p=0.001$. These results indicate that the more often you use the word in a joking manner, the less likely you are to be offended. This would support the theory that friends can use the word with each other because they know that there is that protective barrier and that there is no negative connotation with the word.

**Discussion**

The results indicate that females view the word *bitch* in two different ways. The first way is it is only ok for in-groups to use the word with each other; otherwise it’s offensive and you can choose to use the word in an offensive manner or not. According to the data, half of the participants choose to use the word *bitch* in a negative fashion. The other way that participants view the word is that it never appropriate to use the word. 27% of participants very rarely or never use the word *bitch*.

The first part of my hypothesis was supported. Women use the word *bitch* more often with their close friends than with acquaintances. However, why this phenomenon happens is still ambiguous. I got evidence that supports three different theories as to why women refer to their friends as *bitch*. The first theory is the closeness theory. Friends can call each other *bitch* because there is the protective barrier of trust that has been built between them. One participant, when answering why friends would call their friends *bitch* said, “It communicates closeness. Because this is a right that can go both ways in a friendship, it designates you as someone who is genuinely close to her. My "bitch" is like my sister.”

Another theory that came about was the reclamation theory. Women are using the word to reclaim the word. They are taking something that was once negative and turning it into a positive. One participant expressed this theory when she said, “It's a way for us to reclaim a
negative term and use it as a term of endearment. I usually think of it as when black people call
each other the N-word. It's like saying you understand their struggle and are using it positively.
We use it among friends because we know that they will understand it as such and will not take it
to be pejorative.” This participant even compared it to African Americans and the n-word.

The last theory that was brought up was a societal desensitization to the word. The word
*bitch* may be used so often that people may have become indifferent to the negative connotations
of the word. One participant responded to why friends would call other friends *bitch* said,
“Because the use of slang and offensive language nowadays is so prevalent that we are
desensitized to it. Or I suppose if this person was very angry and could not figure out another
way to express themselves.”

Another discovery came up when looking at participants responses to why they think
friends would call other friends *bitch* when compared to whether the participants used the word
*bitch* or not. Participants who used the word, were much more certain in their answers as to why
this happens. Participants that reported not using the word *bitch* were much more speculative.
One participant who reported to hardly ever use the word responded, “I don't completely
understand why people do this. I suppose it's just that they, as a friend, have the right to do so
without offending their friend.” There is uncertainty in the answer. However, someone who
reported using the word very frequently gave the response, “"Sister bitch, you're my bitch, that's
my bitch"... all of those have to do with being close enough to call each other that. It's kind of
like the way the N word is thrown around in Black culture. Bitch is part of my culture.” This
participant, whether being correct in her response or not, was able to provide a clear answer as to
why she uses the word.
This study had one major limitation. Most of the research done on this subject focused on the negative side of the word, so it was difficult finding previous research that supported my hypothesis. I wanted to study the positives of the word. According to the data that I found there is a positive side to the word *bitch*. 
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References


Appendix

Interview questions:

1. Do you use the word Bitch?
2. Have you ever called someone a bitch with the intention to hurt them?
3. When talking with your friends, do you ever refer to them as a bitch in joking way?
4. If you do refer to your friends as bitches, how often does this happen?
5. Do you ever call your friends bitches with the intention to be hurtful?
6. Do your friends refer to you as a bitch in a joking way?
7. Would you be offended if a close friend called you a bitch?
8. Would you get offended if only an acquaintance (not a close friend) called you a bitch?
9. How often do you call an acquaintance (not a close friend) a bitch?
10. How often do you call an enemy a bitch?
11. Is it okay for a male to call a female a bitch?
12. Why do you think one friend would call another friend a bitch?

Demographics

1. Grade in school
2. Race
3. Gender
Informed Consent

This research is being conducted by Kelly Bednar, a student in the Social Psychology course at Hanover College. The experiment in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine how females use the word bitch. You complete a 12 item questionnaire asking about your uses of the word. Afterwards you will answer a few demographics questions. Once you have answered all of the questions you will be debriefed about the study.

The entire experiment will not take more than 15 minutes. There are no known risks involved in being in this study, beyond those of everyday life. The information you provide during the experiment is completely anonymous; at no time will your name be associate with the responses that you give. If you have any questions about what you will be doing in the study or about the study itself, feel free to ask them now or at any other time during your participation.

If you have any questions now or after the study, please contact:

• For questions about the research itself, you may contact the researcher: Kelly Bednar at bednark14@hanover.edu.

• For questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you may contact the faculty the faculty member supervising the research and also the chair of Hanover College’s Institutional Review Board, Dr. Bill Altermatt, at altermattw@hanover.edu.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Refusing to participate or ceasing to participate at any time will involve no penalty. Incomplete participation will not result in credit for participating, but you may complete an alternative assignment of equal time commitment in order to receive credit. Please print the page if you would like to keep a copy of this consent form.
Debriefing Form

The study in which you just participated was designed to measure females’ use of the word bitch. You answered a 12 item questionnaire. There was only one version of this survey. I was testing whether the closeness of the friendship with someone affected how two people use the word bitch around each other. There is little previous research on this exact topic but it has been found that women have started to use the word more since the feminist movement.

Please do not discuss this study with other potential participants until the semester is over. If people have outside influence when participating in this study they may respond differently, jeopardizing my results.

As soon as the results from this study are available, you can read about them by going to the following website and clicking on the experiment in which you participated in:

http://vault.hanover.edu/~altermattw/social/reports.html

If you have any questions, please contact:

• For questions about the research itself, you may contact the researcher: Kelly Bednar at bednark14@hanover.edu.

• For questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you may contact the faculty the faculty member supervising the research and also the chair of Hanover College’s Institutional Review Board, Dr. Bill Altermatt, at altermattw@hanover.edu.