That’s Bullshit: Why Swearing is Beneficial and Censorship is Not

We have all been there. You are in public with your family, and someone is swearing loudly within earshot. Your parents cringe and hope you can’t hear it; you cringe and hope your parents can’t hear it. You both know that in another situation the same word would not make either party uncomfortable, so why is it different given this dynamic? And how can these words make people so uncomfortable when, after all, they are just words? Take the word “fuck” for example. Four letters, one syllable, and yet it causes so much discomfort and emotional response in the wrong company or context. Perhaps you were even uncomfortable by reading the word in this academic paper.

Swear words are so much more than just plain, old, words. Swear words cause controversy, and many people have an emotional response to them. The response does not come from the concept or item they refer to because people have no problem saying synonyms of many swear words (e.g. poop in lieu of shit). The response does not come from particular groupings of syllables and sounds, for most swear words have words that sound the same which people would not give a second look (e.g. luck compared to fuck) (Pinker). It is more than the pronunciation or denotation. It is the connotation behind them, internalized at a young age, that causes the uproar when profanity is used in certain contexts.
When children are developing their lexicons, they learn swear words quite early; “studies show that swearing emerges by age two and becomes adultlike by ages 11 or 12. By the time children enter school, they have a working vocabulary of 30–40 offensive words” (Jay and Janschewitz). However, swear words are merely words to a child until someone reprimands or enlightens them (Jay). The question remains, why are these certain words taught to be taboo? The proof that swear words can physically or tangibly corrupt youth is nonexistent, and yet the myth that this is true continues to be passed down through generations. As much as parents try to prevent it by censoring the media that the child accesses, children learn swear words, and they also learn the taboo on the words. If adults succeeded in preventing the youth of America from learning of swear words, they would also prevent them from internalizing the taboo. It is clear that the internalization of a swear word is linked with childhood development because people who learn English as a second language later in life have much lesser emotional responses to swear words in English than swear words in their first language (Drews). As people grow up and develop, they internalize the taboos of their own culture and language and pass it on to children when they become caregivers. This is how swear words have persisted since ancient times.

There is a scientific reason why swear words evoke stronger emotional responses than normal words. The amygdala is the part of the brain used for processing emotion. To give an idea of the function of the amygdala, stimulating it results in panic attacks or aggression.
Destroying it results in placidness and fearlessness (Drews). It is clear from using Positron Emission Topography (PET) scans that the amygdala is highly active when exposed to swear words (Drews). This may explain the reason that so many people react more strongly to these words that our society decides are taboo; these words evoke stronger emotional reactions because the amygdala is activated when someone hears the word. Aphasia patients present further proof that the taboo words in our culture are stored differently in the brain. Aphasia is when there is damage to the normal language centers in the brain causing language impairment. In many cases the patients are still able to swear. Michelle Drews, a neurobiology student, reports, “for example, R.N., a patient with global aphasia as a result of a stroke involving his frontal, temporal, and parietal lobes, could only say ‘well,’ ‘yeah,’ ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ ‘goddammit,’ and ‘shit’” (Drews). The fact that taboo words have a unique place in the brain suggests that these words came from an evolutionary purpose. And if they have an evolutionary purpose, then the next stop on the logical train of thought is that swear words must have some benefit to people and are not corruptive. The notion that swearing can be detrimental to a person’s character and can hold no benefits comes from the Christian religion, upon which America was built.

Swearing an oath, taking God’s name in vain, and blasphemy have all spurred words and phrases that should not be said, yet still exist. For example, people would often “swear to God” in order to give their promises weight, as if should they be lying, God would take some kind of
action against them. In fact, the oath “God blind me [if I’m lying]” became the British swear
“blimey” (Pinker). As our society secularized, these swear words lost their power and were
replaced with perceivedly harsher swear words centered around topics of bodily excretion and
copulation. Even the constructions that religious swears were used in have been replaced with
more modern swear words despite the fact that meaning is lost (Pinker). For example many are
curious about what exactly the phrase “fuck you” means. Some guess that it is short for “fuck
yourself” or “get fucked;” however, the actual root of this phrase is the phrase “damn you,”
which lost its weight after our society secularized since it is based in the Christian religion. In
order to revitalize the phrase, “damn” was replaced with “fuck,” creating the phrase “fuck you”
(Pinker). This shows that our society is more concerned with sex than with being damned to hell
for eternity.

Many people wonder, why is it that sex, as a subject along with the various words for it
even used in other contexts, is so taboo? For the idealistic mind, sex is just a source of pleasure
for two consenting adults. Once one delves deeper into the matter it becomes apparent that this is
not true. Steven Pinker, a cognitive scientist, psychologist, linguist, and professor at Harvard
University observes that “sex has high stakes, including exploitation, disease, illegitimacy,
incest, jealousy, spousal abuse, cuckoldry, desertion, feuding, child abuse, and rape” (Pinker).

Sex is not always a boon, which is why the subject has remained very taboo in America, even as
the religious stigma around extramarital sex has lessened. Similarly, the taboos on excretion have a clear reason for existing as well. Bodily excretion can spread disease and sickness, so the disgust people have with it is really an evolutionary trait. Referencing sex or excretion in the wrong contexts can make people feel uncomfortable as it forces them to dredge up unpleasant images and thoughts in an overwhelming fashion due to how swear words are stored in the brain. However, in many contexts, swear words are not used for their literal meanings. Instead, swear words are often used for the emotional response they evoke.

There are also swear words that are taboo based on historical conflicts between groups, and they are usually negative ways to refer to a minority group. Whether it be to highlight the differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or any number of other kinds of groups, these taboo words are known as slurs and are best to be avoided in daily speech because few people are comfortable hearing them, unlike other swear words (Jay). In the special case of “nigger”, many groups of black people have taken back the slur used to abuse and marginalize their ancestors, and started using it as a positive in their communities. Yet to some it is a stinging reminder of what their ancestors suffered (Demby). There are millions of different opinions and perceptions of “nigger,” which just enhances the fact that the context in which one uses certain swear words is just as important as the actual words used. This concept comes into play especially when it comes to the law.
The First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America grants every person in America freedom of speech; however, there is something called unprotected speech.

“Certain categories of speech are not entitled to First Amendment protection, including fighting words, true threats and incitement to imminent lawless action” (Hudson). Often times these forms of unprotected speech can be characterized by taboo language, but swears cannot be overtly outlawed due to their ever changing and subjective nature. Additionally, not all uses of swear words are linked to unprotected speech; in fact, very few of them are. That does not stop many people from trying to ban use of all swear words in the media. Due to the knee-jerk reaction many people have to swear words, few have stopped and considered why they are trying to ban swear words.

Because severity of swear words varies from community to community, social circle to social circle, and even person to person, coupled with the fact that swear words are grammatically unique, defining them in order to outlaw them is nearly impossible. That does not stop people from trying. Marjorie Heins, lawyer and writer, explains that “the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] derives its power to punish constitutionally protected but ‘indecent’ expression on radio and broadcast television from a criminal law that bans ‘obscene, profane, or indecent’ language on the airwaves” (Heins). Heins goes on to explain that, “in its Pacifica decision of 1978, the supreme court affirmed this power by a 5–4 vote. The FCC’s
standards, as upheld in *Pacifica*, define as indecent any expression that ‘describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities or organs’” (Heins). Indicated by the close vote on the the rule banning “indecent” language on the airwaves (5-4), this is a controversial topic. If you ban certain specific words that mean “sexual or excretory activities or organs,” why are all words that mean “sexual or excretory activities or organs,” such as “intercourse,” “slept with,” and “crap” not banned? If all of those words are banned, there would be no such thing as realistic depiction of everyday adult life on television or radio. If no one can relate to the content on the airwaves it would no longer be interesting and television and radio will go extinct. That is all speculation, but it is because swear words are so hard to define, the laws against “indecent” language on the airwaves may outlaw more words than just the ones intended, infringing on our First Amendment rights. Then it becomes a subjective ordeal for the courts to attempt to figure out which words to punish people for airing and which not to. This rule that the FCC implemented does not ban all uses of the swear words that they are trying to if, in the context, they are not denoting sexual or excretory activity. In other words, stating “this thesis is fucking cool,” falls into a gray area where, in this context, the word fuck does not mean “have sex.” There are the literal uses of swear words, and there are times they are used for the emotional connotation (Jay). It is only the literal uses that were banned by the FCC. The FCC tried to fix this loophole by
creating the “fleeting expletives” rule. As Heins explains, “Even if used in a nonsexual context…
the word ‘fuck,’ said the commissioners is inherently sexual- and inherently offensive” (Heins).
This was eventually overturned because what composes a swear word is completely subjective
and changes over time. What is offensive to one person is acceptable to, even encouraged by
another. In order for swearing to hold benefits, there must be people who are offended by the use
of swear words and people who encourage the use of swear words.

Swearing is beneficial to both the individual and society as a whole, but in order to obtain
these benefits, swear words have to be thought of as taboo and cannot be destigmatized. The
benefits of swearing include increased pain tolerance, expression of emotion, and establishment
of informality and closeness in a group. In order to determine whether swearing causes increased
pain tolerance, Richard Stephens, a professor at Keele University School of Psychology,
conducted a trial with college students that involved them putting their hands in cold water. They
did two trials each, one while swearing, one while not. Richard Stephens concluded, “swearing
therefore enabled the participants to tolerate to the cold temperature for longer, and also caused a
reduction in their perception of the pain felt” (Mo). This benefit is linked to how taboo the word
is to the person saying it. The people that do not swear a lot in their daily life experience a
greater increase in pain tolerance when swearing. This shows that in order to reap the benefits of
swearing, the words must be appropriately avoided in certain contexts. If one were to say the
swear words as normal words, then saying these words would not cause increased pain tolerance. The benefit is reaped because of the taboo, not in spite of it.

Another benefit of swearing is that swear words provide people with an arsenal of words to use when they need to express extreme emotion. Timothy Jay, linguist, swear word expert, and professor at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts asserts, “taboo words persist because they can intensify emotional communication to a degree that non-taboo words cannot” (Jay).

Sometimes people feel strongly about a subject and they need to voice their opinions using words that appropriately communicate their emotions. This is because swear words draw the attention of almost everyone in earshot. However, if someone uses the same swear word for daily speech and mild emotional expression, then when they use it in an attempt to express really strong emotions, it will not be as effective or piquing. There are further benefits that accompany swearing to express emotion, “A positive outcome is also achieved when a speaker replaces physical violence with speech or feels a sense of relief or catharsis after swearing” (Jay). Again, swear words are clearly more than just words that we have decided not to say, they cause actual physical effects. Many people feel that the only way to express their emotions accurately is to use physical violence; however, using swear words fulfills the same need with much lesser consequence. Some say that swear words are just a precursor to physical violence, but a study by Timothy Jay and Kristen Jay (nee Janschewitz), a cognitive neuroscientist, shows that out of
10,000 recorded episodes of public swearing, none of them led to violence (Jay and Janschewitz). However, in many instances of violence the instigator may swear. This is because if they are feeling strongly enough about an issue to be violent, they may utilize words that express their strong emotion as well, and swear words are often used for this purpose. However, because people may use swear words in cases of violence, it does not mean that swearing causes violence; in most cases of violence, violence would occur regardless of the use of swear words. The causative link of swearing to violence is blown out of proportion in the minds of many people, for swearing acts as a form of catharsis and expression, which oftentimes is not channeled into violent acts.

The last significant benefit of swearing is its social effect. Often people will swear more freely with people they are closer to socially. Furthermore, swearing can make people who perhaps do not know one another so well feel closer and more familiar. Drews states, “the willingness to break a cultural taboo in front of others creates an atmosphere of informality and sense of community” (Drews). Unwritten social laws dictate that it is improper to swear in front of superiors, authority figures, and strangers. This is because there is no knowledge of what language will offend and what will not. Using swear words communicates that the people involved are equal, friendly, and familiar enough to know what is appropriate. In social situations, “positive outcomes are achieved by using taboo words in jokes and humor, social
commentary, sex talk, storytelling, in-group slang, and self deprecation or ironic sarcasm in order to promote social harmony or cohesion” (Jay). All of these uses are appropriate between friends, which is why they cause “social harmony.” If swear words were acceptable in all kinds of company, they would not effectively establish closeness and familiarity in social situations. Additionally, because swearing is acceptable in close social groups, when trying to express strong emotion to the same people, the words used lightly for social benefit may lose their effectiveness for expression. This is why it is beneficial to have different levels of harshness of taboo words. Some are more taboo than others due to what they mean. For example “fuck” merely means sex; “motherfucker” on the other hand suggests Oedipal incest. Even when it is not used for its literal meaning, the relative harshness from its meaning carries over to its use for emotional reasons. This allows, in many groups, even with casual use of some taboo words, strong emotional expression using different, harsher, swear words.

If swearing has so many benefits then why were we always taught that it is harmful? Many people believe that swearing is harmful because it is linked to “sexual harassment, blasphemy, obscene phone calls, discrimination, hate speech, and verbal abuse” (Jay). Timothy and Kristen Jay conducted a study of public swearing, “we have recorded over 10,000 episodes of public swearing by children and adults, and rarely have we witnessed negative consequences. We have never seen public swearing lead to violence. Most public uses of taboo words are not in
anger; they are innocuous or produce positive consequences” (Jay and Janschewitz). The percentage of swearing episodes attributed to harmful events is not enough to disparage swearing altogether. Two thirds of swearing data is attributed to expression of frustration, anger, or surprise. Another large chunk is just due to trying to “fit in with others’ informal use of taboo words” (Jay). The harmful acts listed above can be characterized by swearing because they are typically characterized by strong emotion. Swearing is used to express emotion and sometimes that emotion is linked to harmful acts. However, the majority of strong emotion is not harmful and still needs a way to be expressed effectively. Additionally, in the situations where swear words can be used in a harmful way, other combinations of seemingly innocent words can have the same, if not worse, effect (Jay). Essentially, the benefits of swearing cannot be ignored because of the few times it is linked with harmful acts, but just because swearing is not harmful, it does not mean the taboo can be shed; the taboo is integral to gaining the benefits of swearing.

There are two sides when it comes to opinions on the concept of swearing: Moralists and Modernists. Moralists are against swearing of all kinds in all contexts. They believe that the ubiquity of swearing is an indication of “the collapse of civility and the coarsening of American culture,” beginning in the 60s and having gotten worse and worse throughout the last few decades (Nunberg). In all reality, this complaint is nothing new. “People have been complaining about the decline of manners and morals since the time of Horace and Aristotle” (Nunberg).
Swear words have to be taught as bad or else they would lose their weight. The one thing moralists are right about is the fact that swearing is more widespread these days (Nunberg). This does not mean, however, that the downfall of humanity is imminent. There are more benefits associated with swearing than there are detriments. Modernists believe that swearing in appropriate contexts is not troublesome. They believe that when people use swears in inappropriate contexts it is a mild inconvenience, not the downfall of humanity. Modernist arguments are more moderate and based in fact than Moralist arguments, which is highlighted by the fact that many people who actively disapprove of swearing do it anyway (Nunberg). There are some more radical thinkers that believe that destigmatizing all swear words would help solve to eradicate many prejudices such as sexism, slutshaming, and racism, but if that were done then all the benefits of swearing would be lost. In order to reap the benefits of swear words, the words have to be somewhat startling to people. There has to be stigma and taboo associated with the words or they would not serve their purpose. Geoffrey Nunberg summarizes the paradox in a catchy phrase, “You can’t have profanity if there are no prudes left to be shocked by it” (Nunberg).

Now that some of the myths around swearing have been busted, it is time to address the one that causes the most controversy within media and censorship. Will swearing somehow harm your child’s development? In a short answer, no. Studies show that most uses of swear words are
harmless and this extends to children too. By the time kids start school they know approximately 40 swear words (Jay and Janschewitz). This means that censoring all media around children is not effective in sheltering them from swear words. However, just because they know of the word and of the ban on the word, it does not mean that they know what the word means or when or how to appropriately use it. It is pertinent for children, in order to be adept in social situations and appropriate in formal situations, to learn the denotations of and connotations behind swear words.

Some say children’s media should be censored because children are mimics; they will say anything they hear on television. However, assuming that children already know the words, which the studies say they do, then hearing the words in their media would provide them with some inkling of how to appropriately use them. They would mimic the social cues in the media. More importantly, parents or caregivers teaching appropriate context in which to use swear words is integral to training a socially adept child. Otherwise they might tell their Grandmother the new, cool word they just learned. Not to suggest that the insertion of swear words into light-hearted, minimal conflict, kids’ television shows would be beneficial. That would show the use of swear words to be appropriate in situations that do not warrant the harshness of swear words. Rather, the more realistic shows such as the ones on Disney Channel or Nickelodeon, which portray teenage life almost completely accurately except for the lack of swearing and most
references to intimacy, could benefit from portrayal of swear words, making the shows more relatable and teaching kids to use swear words appropriately. Furthermore, it is not beneficial to censor all media for the fear of children overhearing swear words. Hearing the words, especially in passing, cannot cause any sort of harm to children. As long as parents take it upon themselves to teach their children the appropriate times and ways to swear, this level of censorship in the American media is not necessary, and many children would be socially adept both among their peers and among their superiors. When it comes to censoring the media for the sake of children, it is like fighting a battle that has already been lost. The next best course of action is to make sure children know how to use these words they have been armed with.

Based on what was previously proven, some may argue that if children are taught swear words, the words will lose their taboo nature, and therefore they will lose the benefits that come along with them. Although taboos are developed in childhood, as long as children are taught swear words as taboo and not as normal words, they will reap the benefits of swearing. Knowledge about appropriate context will not prevent the internalization of the taboo. Swear words will be set apart from the beginning because part of learning the swear word and its connotations includes learning that swear words can be offensive in certain contexts. Swear words cannot just meld into normal words unless most every person in most every context would feel completely comfortable hearing it, just as if it were any plain word. The taboos along with
all the benefits accompanying taboos will not be lost if children are clued in about appropriate context in which to use swears.

Overall, swearing should be verbally discouraged in inappropriate settings, but to have tangible punishment or laws against swearing that has not directly insulted another person or group is hard to enforce objectively. Take a look at how harshly people react to this special set of words that have been decided to be taboo. In terms of the media, Americans allow infringement on their First Amendment rights to free speech in order to protect the youth of America from what they already know. Many people react irrationally when it comes to swear words especially around children. Because children are already aware of many swear words by a young age, at some point it becomes more helpful to teach the children rather than reprimand them or censor the world around them. The reason this is not the popular opinion and the reason that almost no American thought surrounding the subject of swearing is logical is because swearing is linked to strong emotion, and emotion is rarely rational.
Works Cited


