

Examples of the Use of Gendered and Biased Language, With Particular Reference to Sexual Abuse of Women and Girls by Julie M. Still

If, as Burr suggests, language and thought are intrinsically linked, the way we talk and write about something not only reflects but influences the way we, as a society, or a subsection thereof, think about that subject. This the reason advocacy groups fight over the naming rights to procedures (partial birth abortion vs late term abortion), public policy (estate tax vs death tax), and concepts (pro-life vs pro-choice). How we label something is also how we define it.

The fight over language is at the heart of what is sometimes termed the “culture wars” and “political correctness.” Political correctness, when applied to language, implies choosing words that would not lend offense to any one group, or indicate a preference for one lifestyle, whether religion or sexual orientation, over another. In fact, as [Miriam Webster Online](#), defines it in this way:

conforming to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated

While the mass media sometimes makes much of political correctness and the detriments of it, and implies it has been overdone, there are areas of language use where very little progress has been made. These may be small things, they may be large, depending on one's viewpoint.

The role of women and girls in society, and gender roles generally, are areas where some successes have been made. The media may now refer to police officers instead of policemen and congressional representatives instead of congressmen, but in other areas there is still a definite gendered bias. This article will look at a variety of these, some seemingly innocuous, some seemingly more grievous, and look at some of the legal implications of language use.

Word Choices

Something rather simple, and possibly merely a wording choice by a reporter, perhaps made in lieu of having a definitive grasp of the facts, is whether a man who uses his wife's maiden name for his company is honoring his wife or his father-in-law. A county commissioner in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania owns a mortgage company. Three newspaper articles reference the origin of the name of that company differently.

In one article (Henson), we find this sentence:

In 1979 he returned to the private sector, and in 1990 he founded Keegan Mortgage Corp. in Oreland, which is named for his father-in-law, Kevin E. Keegan.

A later article from the same paper (Shields and Budoff) says the same thing:

From 1975 through 1979 he was regional director of mortgage underwriting for the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, and in 1989 he founded his company, Keegan Mortgage, named after his father-in-law.

However, an article in another paper (Milewski) referenced it differently:

He broke off on his own in 1990, starting Keegan Mortgage Corp. in Oreland. Keegan is his wife's maiden name.

The simple change of wording, which does not necessarily negate what the other paper said, changes the meaning. Is he honoring his wife or his father-in-law? It could be both. The name itself becomes irrelevant. The perception of wealth and power traveling through masculine hands

is reinforced by implying or stating that the business is named for his father-in-law and that term, instead of saying his wife's father, removes the woman from the process altogether. Stating that the company is given his wife's maiden name without referencing her father gives greater influence to the woman herself and not so much her paternal parentage. This is the type of wording literate Americans see daily yet may not stop to contemplate. Yet those wording choices can influence further thought.

We may think that the legal status of women is settled in modern courts, that the lines between people and property and adults and children and consent and coercion are clear. But they are not.

As an example of this, a recent court case in Philadelphia demonstrates very clearly the way word choices can have tremendous impact on a woman's daily life and the legal avenues open to her. According to the Philadelphia Daily News (Porter):

A defendant accused of forcing a prostitute at gunpoint to have sex with him and three other men got lucky, so to speak, last week.

A Philadelphia judge dropped all sex and assault charges at his preliminary hearing.

Municipal Judge Teresa Carr Deni instead held the defendant on the bizarre charge of armed robbery for - get this - "theft of services."

By denying the prostitute the right to accuse the men of rape, but only of theft of services the judge (who went to be reelected within weeks of the event) is, in effect saying, that women who are prostitutes cannot be raped, a supposition that dramatically impacts all women. Wouldn't the next step be "I thought she was..." or "She looked like" Perhaps that is overplaying the situation but one judge deciding that this particular woman cannot, in that set of circumstances, sue for rape, sets a precedent for the same rule to apply in other circumstances. The phrase "theft of services" is indeed a strange one to use, as is the charge of "armed robbery." It reduces the woman to a product which can be stolen, not a person who can be assaulted. The head of the Philadelphia Bar Association reprimanded Judge Deni (Slobodzian) and the charges were refilled before another judge, but Judge Deni remains in office and it is unlikely she is the only judge to hold these views. The law is not as settled as we might like.

Father or Child Care?

Other wording choices can both reflect and enhance the prevailing gender roles in society. For example, what is the role of a father in child rearing? Both the popular media and academic researchers have trouble with this. A mother who is in the company of her own children is assumed to be parenting or mothering. There is little question of this. However, what is a father in the company of his own children doing?

According to a major newspaper, he is babysitting, as this sentence (Kummer) suggests:

Circles rimming his eyes, Matthew Neulander shoed the exhaustion that haunts a young resident doctor who works long hours in a city emergency room, only to rise the next morning to baby-sit Madison – the grandchild his mother will never see.

Madison is his daughter. While this article is five years old and the popular press may be forgiven for not being as attentive to such details, one might have higher expectations for academic study, but this is not always the case.

A more scholarly reference to the same issue is a study (Belsky) published earlier this year, of how well children do in child care, which is defined as care by anyone other than the mother, including the child's father, married to the mother and living in the same house. The official definition of child care used was:

Especially because definition would affect which child care arrangements were -- and were not -- studied, the decision was made to define child care broadly, such that any and all nonmaternal care that was regularly scheduled for at least 10 hr per week qualified as "child care," including care by fathers, grandparents, and other relatives.

The authors of the study justify this decision by questioning how care by a grandmother differed from care by a live-in nanny. No further references to fathers are made. The inference is clear, any mother who regularly spends more than an hour and 20 minutes per day away from her child was utilizing child care. The complete disregard for parental care in contemporary society is somewhat baffling.

The fact that the study was in part funded and supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, a division of the National Institute of Health. The imprimatur of one of the nation's primary funding agencies, and a division of the federal government, gives greater credence to the marginalization of fatherhood and the implication that mothers should not cede any insignificant, let alone significant, caretaking to fathers, and that this was done with little explanation, flies in the face of many if not most American families. It is also possible that studies like this one, which defines child care as anything other than maternal care, could be used in divorce and custody cases to the detriment of either parent.

Sharing a Meal with a Murdering Pedophile

The use of language regarding children, especially at risk or abused children is equally questionable. On July 2, 2005, a young girl who had been missing for six weeks was discovered in a chain restaurant, in the custody of a convicted sex offender. Her disappearance coincided with the murder of her mother, an older brother, and her mother's boyfriend. Her nine year old brother disappeared at the same time. In the intervening time the nine year old had been abused and murdered, the girl kept captive and sexually abused.

Newspaper and newswire stories at the time of her recovery use a variety of words. This list is compiled from a Lexis / Nexis search. Only the sentence describing how she was found is included; articles which used the exact same words were not included.

Newspaper articles:

An 8-year-old Idaho girl who vanished six weeks ago was discovered yesterday eating in a Denny's restaurant near the home where her family was brutally slain - but the 9-year-old brother she disappeared with was feared dead. (Haberman)

Joseph E. Duncan III was found eating in a roadside diner with Shasta Groene, who had been missing with her brother Dylan, 9. Six weeks ago, three members of their family were found bound and beaten to death in their Idaho home. (Reid)

Joseph Edward Duncan III of Fargo, N.D., a convicted sex offender, was arrested Saturday at a Denny's restaurant with the girl, Shasta Groene. He has been charged with kidnapping in the abduction of Shasta and her brother Dylan, 9. ("Nation")

Shasta Groene walked into the Denny's at 1:50 a.m. with Joseph E. Duncan III, a registered sex offender from Fargo, N.D., and a fugitive from a charge of sexually molesting a 7-year-old last summer in Minnesota, police said. ("Harden, Blaine")

An eight-year-old girl, missing for more than six weeks after her mother and two others were bludgeoned to death at home, was found in an Idaho diner with a registered sex offender whose weblog had warned he was preparing to seek revenge on society. (Wilson)

His daughter Shasta Groene, 8, was found eating breakfast Saturday with convicted child rapist Joseph Duncan at a Denny's in her hometown of Coeur D'Alene, Idaho (Rose)

Newswire articles

Duncan was arrested Saturday at a diner in Coeur d'Alene, when Shasta Groene was rescued, apparently unharmed. Police said they feared her brother Dylan was dead. ("Accused")

An 8-year-old girl who disappeared with her brother six weeks ago from a home where family members were bludgeoned to death was found Saturday at a Denny's restaurant in the same town. ("Missing")

An missing Idaho girl was rescued from her alleged captor Saturday, but police said her brother, who had also been missing since May, is probably dead. ("UPI")

Joseph Edward Duncan III, of Fargo, was with Shasta Groene at a Denny's in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, early Saturday when a waitress recognized the girl and called police. Shasta's 9-year-old brother, Dylan, remained missing and was feared dead. (Geranios, "Sex")

More than six weeks after she disappeared from a home where family members were bludgeoned to death, an 8-year-old girl was found safe Saturday, sharing a meal with a registered sex offender at a Denny's restaurant in her hometown. (Geranios, "Missing Idaho")

An 8-year-old girl who disappeared with her brother six weeks ago from a home where family members were bludgeoned to death was found early Saturday at a restaurant in her hometown with a registered sex offender, officials said. (Geranios, "Missing US")

The variety of words used is interesting. The last three in the list, all written by the same author and for the same newswire, Associated Press, run the gamut. She "was with" the man, she was "sharing a meal" with the man, and again simply "found with." All have different implications. The most alarming are those which say she was found "sharing a meal with" or "eating with" her captor. Sharing a meal usually indicates a joint activity, a form of fellowship. A shared meal is usually prearranged, a meeting of friends or an invitation to someone's house, a sign of friendship, if only temporary. Eating with someone is usually an indication of, if nothing else, a temporary truce, but often a more congenial interaction. Both indicate a meeting of equals, adults share meals and eat with adults generally. You generally do not "share a meal" with someone who has held you captive against your will and forced you into sexual activity you did not want, let alone murdered most of your family.

Granted these sentences were taken out of context, but all represent the wording used to indicate how the girl was found. Some clearly state in the same sentence that the man she was found with had a criminal history. Some say she was found or rescued. All of those words imply that she was not a consenting or even necessarily cooperative party in the activity. Some say in the same sentence that family members were brutally murdered, but other simply say she was found eating with the man or sharing a meal with him. All of those words imply something done by choice. Given that a child could probably not drive it is an almost physical certainty that she was

brought to the restaurant by the man she was with. The realistic ability of someone in that situation to make a choice is neglected.

One other drawback to the word choices implying the girl enjoyed or consented to being with the man who killed her mother and abused her, is that child sex offenders, as one might expect, believe, in greater proportion to the population at large, that children enjoy and actively provoke or solicit sex with adults (Mann). Saying the girl was sharing a meal with her abuser merely reinforces this belief.

There is also the factor of voice. The media seldom reports the feelings of children. Certainly children appear in the media but in the name of protecting them and their privacy, the actual voices of children are seldom heard. In the case above, we may project our own adult remembrances of childhood onto the young girl and try to imagine her feelings, but we do not hear from her. Ridley refers to the writing about children without including their voices as "paternal journalism."

Child Prostitutes and Sexually Abused Girls

The use of wording that implies choice is particularly disturbing when it is applied to the children who have been sexually abused. One particular example of this is the use of the phrase "child prostitute" to indicate children who have been made available to adults for sexual purposes. This is a frequently used phrase to describe sexually abused children when money changes hands, even if the child is not the recipient of that money. "Child prostitutes" and "child prostitution" are the accepted subject headings for this criminal activity involving children in a number of academic databases, including Academic Search Premiere. Others, such as PsycInfo, produced by the American Psychological Association, refer searchers to other terms, such as "prostitution," "rape" and "child abuse."

To provide again examples of the popular and scholarly press, here is an excerpt from Parade Magazine (Vachss), a circular found in many Sunday newspapers:

"What was wrong with calling Destiny a "child prostitute"? After all, she was a child, and she was engaged in prostitution. First, the word itself implies a judgment of character. Don't we call people who sell out their moral convictions in exchange for personal gain "whores"? More important, prostitution implies a willing exchange. Ultimately, the term "child prostitution" implies that little children are "seductive," that they "volunteer" to have sex with adults in exchange for cash (which, of course, the children never see).

This concept is also discussed in the academic setting. Goddard discusses this at length. Echoing the message in the popular article quote above, the authors focus on the economic or contractual implications of the word prostitute. It is an occupation, often referred to as the world's oldest, a job, an exchange of money or goods for services, in this case sexual services. Yet in our society child labor laws would forbid children from engaging in such a job. Any child not deemed wise or coordinated to work a cotton candy machine (electrical in nature) is surely not of age to trade sex for money. Any sexual exchange between a person under the age of consent is legally statutory rape. Yet the phrase "child prostitute" continues to be used by the media. The illegality of prostitution also casts aspersions on the morality and conscience of the children involved. A prostitute is, by law, engaging in illegal activity, so if a female child also engages in that activity is not she also a criminal? While the phrase "child prostitute" is used in the media we far less often read about "child murderers" or "child robbers" although juveniles are involved in those crimes as well. Children whose parents involve them in crimes of that nature are typically regarded as innocent and victims of parental or adult coercion. This leniency is not visible when labels such as child prostitute are used. Vachss suggest using the phrase "prostituted child" instead as it indicates the child was acted upon or forced into the activity as opposed to choosing to be involved.

Even when money is not involved, newspapers tend to use language implying consent. Here are a few examples from Pennsylvania newspapers in recent years:

A jury Tuesday convicted a Doylestown disc jockey of having a sexual relationship with a 13-year-old Fulton Township girl. ("Disc jockey")

Perkins spent weeks before those attacks in a sexual relationship with an 11-year-old runaway. He also was charged with her rape. (Conroy)

A young woman testified in Northampton County Court on Tuesday that her long sexual relationship with a man decades older began because she loved him, he told her God would be angry if she refused and he wouldn't take her trick-or-treating unless she complied. (Braden)

In that case he was 56, she was 18 and the "relationship" began when she was 12.

A 29-year-old Philadelphia man allegedly had an ongoing sexual relationship with a 13-year-old girl until she told police Friday, according to court records. ("Teen tells")

Richard Norman "Chip" Williams, 50, of Mooresville, N.C., already is serving a 26-year prison sentence on federal charges that he had a sexual relationship with a girl who was 11 years old when they met online in 2002. ("Ex-NASCAR")

A 23-year-old youth soccer coach who also is running for the Wissahickon school board was arrested Tuesday night and charged with trying to lure a 13-year-old girl he had met at a soccer camp into a sexual relationship. (Snyder)

Cartagena was charged with having a sexual relationship with a girl - now 20 - beginning in 2001, and continued later with two other children, now 5 and 10 years old, at various homes in the city. The oldest victim gave birth to a child she said Cartagena fathered. Cartagena was charged with indecently assaulting the two younger victims and allowing the oldest girl to drink alcohol before she was 21 years old. ("Man waives")

In contrast to Judge Carr mentioned earlier in this article, the legal implications of language are very well known to some in the judiciary. Debra Todd, recently elected to Pennsylvania's Supreme Court, has studied the words used to describe sexual abuse of children, especially in the popular media, and describes her views succinctly in an article based on a graduate thesis she wrote in 2004:

It should be painfully obvious to all of us, including reporters, prosecutors, and judges, that thirty-six year-old men do not have "sexual relationships" with twelve-year old girls. (This man had allegedly been abusing the older sister since she was age ten.) Grown men do not "carry on" sexual relationships with children nor do they "continue to see" victims, as if they are dating. Likewise, a child trying to end longstanding sexual abuse does not "try to break it off." The use of such idioms, more properly reserved for consensual adult relationships, are utterly inappropriate in the context of a child sexual abuse and assaults.

She writes this after providing a number of examples of newspaper articles similar to the ones above describing sexual abuse as "sexual relationships" between men and girls. One of her points is that while sexual predators who focus on strangers and abduct children out of their homes are usually vilified in the media (though as seen in the Shasta Groene case above, the wording is not always indicative of this), those who prey upon children within their familial or social orbit are sometimes presented, and sentenced, differently.

Conclusion

The everyday use of language, especially in the media, can and does influence our thinking. As consumers of media it is incumbent on the reader to use some vigilance and awareness of what terms are being used and how. This is not only a general aspect of critical thinking and participatory democracy but also because the words and implications thereof also influence the judicial system and the presumption of innocence afforded not only to adults but also to children. The use of language implying consent should not be used when describing sexual contact with children received by the law as being too young to provide such consent.

While as a society we have become more sensitive to the gender implications of some of the words used, such as replacing those indicating gender with those more gender neutral, there are other areas, especially those regarding children, where little progress has been made.

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