

Further Reflections on the Term “Bitch”

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Kleinman, Ezzell and Frost’s sophisticated analysis of “bitch” is an important contribution to the feminist critique of sexist language. Their analysis of a wide range of examples – Greek and Roman mythology, popular music, television shows, prisons, classroom discussions, feminists “reclaiming” the term, etc. – convincingly demonstrates the term’s cultural ubiquity and its mass uncritical acceptance, both of which they aim to change.

The invitation to write this comment came to us as we were revising a paper about how men convicted of assaulting women partners told stories about their relationships (Schrock, McCabe and Vaccaro 2009). These men had graduated from a batterer intervention program that used a pro-feminist curriculum aimed at transforming how they thought about and treated women. More specifically, graduates were supposed to become men who took responsibility for their violence and were empathetic, non threatening, and egalitarian with their women partners. Our analysis of their stories revealed that while the men did not change in the way the program aimed, the men did learn that they should not straightforwardly blame women partners. That is, no one outright said, “she made me do it.” Reading Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost’s piece helped us understand what was going on in a way that we think contributes something back to their own analysis.

The program graduates started their relationship stories by describing their partners as using their charms to seduce the men into serious relationships or marriage, only later to reveal their more sinister “true selves.” Their accounts presented variations of “after we got married, she completely changed,” as one man put it. When examining their stories about what life was like before their arrests, we found two seemingly contradictory themes. The first was that they portrayed the women they assaulted as becoming increasingly controlling of the men’s leisure activities, friendships, and money. The men essentially took the program’s definition of what it meant to be a “batterer” and applied it to victims. On the other hand, the men also portrayed themselves as jealous, controlling, verbally abusive, and withdrawn—qualities consistent with the program’s definition of “the batterer.” But in these accounts, they portrayed their actions as justifiable because women were insubordinate, irrational, confrontational, and disloyal. Such characterizations foreshadowed how the men talked about the incidents that led to their arrests: the women provoked them into “losing control,” only then to vindictively use the criminal justice system to victimize them.

Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost’s article helped us understand that the men were drawing on the cultural narrative of “the bitch.” Although only a few men uttered the term when describing what they said to their partners during an argument (e.g., “You’re a crazy bitch/a fat-ass bitch”), all men aligned their descriptions of their victims with the term’s cultural meanings. The ubiquity of “bitch” enabled them to invoke the term without saying it. Indeed, not saying it made their stories much more powerful in constructing victims as blameworthy because it made the men themselves appear reasonable. Although we were first reluctant to talk about the men as invoking the cultural notion of the “bitch” because we felt restrained by what the men said, Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost’s article reminded us how powerful and ubiquitous the term is and led us to understand that the men need not say it to use it. Thus, an additional consequence of living in a “bitch culture” is that one does not even have to utter the word to invoke it in ways that linguistically justify women’s subordination.

Our culture provides numerous other sources linking the term “bitch” to representations and actual incidences of violence. One of the approximately 1,160 variations of the term “bitch” in the Urban Dictionary, a popular online resource among our undergraduate students, is “bitch slap,” defined as an open-handed slap to the face that is used to demean a person or show disrespect for her/him.¹ We’ve heard students use this term to refer to someone perceived to have stepped out of line in some fashion, such as “s/he needs a good bitch slap.” An internet search on the term found it in the title of books, magazines, pornographic videos, cosmetic products, song titles, as well as a Facebook application, drink recipe, word processing font, a “Bitch slap Ike Turner Style Award,” and a soon-to-be-released major motion picture.

Most uses of the phrase “bitch slap” draw on the notion, as Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost point out, that a “bitch” often refers to a person who is “(meant to be) dominated, conquered, and vanquished.” In one episode of the HBO series *Entourage*, for example, the protagonist Ari confronts another man, Davies, in front of office colleagues, yelling, “Davies, bring your bitch ass out here,” before demanding an apology. When it doesn’t look like he will get one, Ari slaps Davies and says, “That is what we call a bitch slap. A bitch slap for a bitch.” Ari again asks for an apology and this time gets one from a defeated-looking Davies.² As should be clear here, a “bitch slap” refers to violence that is justifiably aimed at humiliating someone who steps out of line, further reinforcing the notion that “bitches” are “asking for it.”

Research on domestic violence commonly shows that men hurl the insult “bitch” at women right before and during their attacks (see, for example, Weiss 2004). Men’s use of such terms cut themselves off from women’s perspectives, emotionally priming them to assault women (Scully 1990). When men define women as bitches, they are protected from empathizing with women and feeling ashamed about harming women; instead, the “bitch” legitimizes anger and adds a bit of righteousness. Similar to other ways people are dehumanized (Bandura 1999), invoking the “bitch” can also lead to “moral disengagement,” enabling men to suspend usual modes of self-regulation and harm the women they claim to love. As Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost show, “bitch” is often applied to women perceived as challenging men’s power. This means that when women do not defer to men’s wishes or freely give them a “patriarchal dividend,” men can use “bitch” as an interpretive resource to define women as blameworthy objects to be dominated. Thus, our further reflections on the term “bitch” are in line with Kleinman’s (2007: 3) assertion in an earlier piece that “working against sexist language is working against men’s violence against women. It’s one step.”

Examining how men invoke “bitch” when carrying out and justifying violence against women provides support for and clarifications on Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost’s arguments. It also reminds us that there are many opportunities to investigate how people use the term in empirical research. Research has shown how men on athletic teams use the term to foster camaraderie and harass women (Curry 1991), how men in the police academy use it to denigrate and exclude women cadets (Prokos and Padavic 2002), and how business owners use it to shift blame to women who demand action against men’s sexual harassment (Disch and Kane 1996). “Bitch” has also been shown to be used against powerful women while men who wield power in similar ways are let off the hook (Holden 2001). Empirical research that analyzes how the term is used in social life, however, often lacks a broad social, political, and cultural understanding of “bitch.” Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost put this together for us in a clear and precise fashion,

¹ Online source: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bitch>

² Online source: <http://www.arigoldquotes.com/bitch-slap-for-a-bitch/>

providing researchers with analytic tools to better unpack the various meanings and consequences of bitch culture.

Although we believe that further research into how men use the term among themselves and against women is particularly important, we also think it is useful to empirically analyze how women use the term. Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost's insightful analysis brought up that women may use "bitch" to label themselves, friends, enemies, objects to be dominated, or frustrating obstacles. They suspect that women feel cool and powerful uttering the word, but that, regardless of their intentions, doing so helps maintain it as a patriarchal weapon. The richness of their cultural analysis of the term, however, made us want to know more about how it is used interactionally. More specifically, under what conditions do women use it in everyday life? How do they feel about using it in friendly and unfriendly ways? And how do others respond to their use of the term? It would also be useful to systematically analyze women's experiences of being called a "bitch." We are, in other words, advocating for more systematic investigations into bitch culture. One path would be to simply interview women (as well as men) about their experiences using the term and being targeted by it.

A related path would be to investigate women's attempts to "reclaim" or co-opt the term as a part of a group identity. One such group consists of legions of women who proudly adopt "skinny bitch," which Kleinman and associates point out is usually an insult. This group identity stems from the *New York Times* best-selling diet book *Skinny Bitch* and was also popularized through the authors' other books, journal, and exercise DVDs.³ In the authors' first book, they write: "This knowledge will empower you to become a skinny bitch...It's time to strut your skinny ass down the street...to prance around in a thong like you rule the world" (Freedman and Barnouin 2005: 10). In addition, women around the world gather in "Stitch 'n Bitch" groups to engage in sewing, knitting, and crafting. Research characterizes these groups as part of a recent social movement focused on connecting young women (Minahan and Cox 2007), although "Stitch 'n Bitch" groups have been around at least since World War II (Macdonald 1988: 302). Curiously absent from research on these groups is a discussion about why "bitch" is in the group name and what it means to members (see Kelly 2008; Minahan and Cox 2007).

It would be particularly interesting to focus on self-identified feminist women who use the term, such as the women who make and read the U.S. magazine *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*. We agree with Kleinman et al. that its title helps keep a sexist term in social circulation. Nonetheless, we are curious about how editors, writers, and readers make sense of the magazine's use of the term and how it fits into the feminist movement. Are feminists actually trying to value the term or are they problematizing the culture's use of the term? Can better understanding feminists' use of the term enrich our understanding of how efforts to reclaim terms (e.g. "queer" or "dyke") are fraught with complications and unintended consequences?

Overall, we believe that Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost's expansive social, political, and cultural analysis of "bitch" may be applied to unpacking men's and women's personal meanings of and experiences with the term. As symbolic interactionists, we want to know more about how this meaning-making process works in everyday life. We found Kleinman, Ezzell, and Frost's feminist response to bitch culture to be extremely useful in our own work on batterers and imagine that others will also benefit. Such knowledge may also provide the tools to more effectively intervene so that terms that reproduce sexism could be left behind with patriarchy.

³ Online source: <http://www.skinnybitch.net/message.html>

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