

Choosing Our Words: The Dilemma of Gender-Neutral Language

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Working for radical social change within the system is a tricky endeavor. On the one hand, we need to clearly express both our dissatisfaction with the current system and our agenda for change. On the other hand, if we present our position in such a way that it alienates those protecting the status quo, we may be completely disregarded. Each interaction with policy-makers requires a conscious choice of words in order to strike a strategic balance between influence and alienation. At any given time, however, our fear of dismissal by those in power can cloud our judgment, causing us to compromise our message and to undermine our efforts. As we carefully weigh our words in order to make our position as appealing as possible, are we colluding in order not to offend those in power?

At a recent Task Force meeting, a coalition of local residents and community leaders dedicated to creating safety for battered women and to holding batterers accountable, I found myself on the horns of this dilemma. Our Task Force was beginning to gain influence in the community. For the first time we were able to persuade a judge and the sheriff to attend a meeting. These members of the criminal justice system were a weak link in our network of accountability and key to effecting change. Their words and behaviors indicated that they felt that battering was marital conflict gone awry under the influence of drugs and alcohol rather than a campaign of terror aimed at control of women. Their presence was important because it was an opportunity to shift their understanding of battering and make them a part of the solution.

As the meeting progressed, I noticed my agitation as I searched for just the right words to express my position. I sensed that a number of Task Force members were struggling with the same dilemma--whether to describe our work as ending "domestic violence" or to describe it more accurately as ending "male violence against women." I desperately did not want these policy-makers to leave the meeting, literally or figuratively. If they perceived our position as unreasonable or as male bashing, they could stonewall our efforts or dismiss our cause. At a critical moment, I opted to use the term "domestic violence." I felt my language choice misrepresented the mission of the Task Force, disguised the agency of the violence, and obscured possible solutions. I chose language that shielded my dissatisfaction with current policies in an effort to make my case politically palatable and to avert potential conflict with these powerful new members.

What I realized through that process was that I crafted my language in relationship to the listener---those I hope to persuade. Of course, a kind of accommodation or modification of language is usually a consideration in effective communication. However, I was struck here by how my choice of words could indirectly acknowledge, confirm or threaten those in power. By my choice to obscure agency, I did not tamper with their view of reality. My language did not suggest that women's well-being was jeopardized by men's need for power over them. However, when I shielded men's agency, I obscured possible solutions.

How we articulate a problem can determine the kinds of remedies we seek. For example, if we describe homelessness as the result of insufficient affordable housing, we seek very different kinds of solutions than if we describe it as the logical outgrowth of the inhumane distribution of wealth. Different frames result in different solutions. So when we describe our efforts to end male violence against women in a way that shields the reality of who does what to whom, we ascribe causality to everybody and everything but the perpetrator. This is exactly what happens when we use gender-neutral language such as "domestic violence" to describe violence that is gender-based, i.e. male violence against women. Gender-neutral language, while making access to those in power more likely, can transform our opposition into

collusion. In our effort to strike a balance between influence and alienation we may achieve the appearance of influence at the cost of our social change agenda.

During the time I attended this Task Force meeting, I was also reading a book recently published by the National Research Council entitled Understanding Violence against Women. I was curious about the editorial decision concerning the title. Why not Understanding Male Violence Against Women ? The book spoke exclusively of male violence against women except for a passing reference to lesbian battering which the authors acknowledged would not be addressed in this volume. Would its conclusions and recommendations have differed if its title brought men, as agents, squarely into the picture? An observation by Ngaire Naffine, making a similar point about her discipline, came to mind: "Criminology has been developed and presented as a study of men (by men) and their relation to crime, but it is a study that is uninterested in men (as men) and that fails to recognize the consequent specificity, limitations and underlying assumptions of the discipline." Ms. Naffine goes on to document that, although men commit the overwhelming majority of crime, there is a steadfast resistance among criminologists to examining the social construction of maleness as a causal factor for that crime. Similarly, when we choose gender-neutral language, we make it impossible to recognize men as a gender class or to identify the systemic gender-bias in their acts of violence against women.

Understanding Violence against Women is not an example of sloppy scholarship, quite the contrary. It courageously names men as perpetrators of violence against women but without the specificity of identifying men as a gender class---that there is something intrinsic to manhood, as we have constructed it, that encourages male violence against women. By neglecting to name men as the gender class responsible for male violence against women, this volume leaves in place the cultural assumption of man as the archetype of humankind. In so doing, it eliminates maleness as the root of violence against women. Portraying men as essentially human rather than as gendered positions them as the unexamined "standard" against which women must be viewed as deviant. This attitude directs us to identify and eliminate the risk factors for women instead of seeing them as targeted because they are women. When we scrutinize victims (women) as the carriers of risk factors for the violence perpetrated against them, we ignore the male-cultural-norm promoting this violence.

After the authors dedicated two hundred pages to a discussion of male violence against women, the most logical recommendation for future research---why men, as men, can and do attack women---is conspicuously absent. When recommendations are framed as the need for "interventions with offenders and victims," we obscure effective solutions. In this vernacular, men as a gender class fades out of focus. The book does contain references to the "cultural context of coercion and power" that promotes violence against women. However, men are then repeatedly identified not as participants of a woman-hating culture but as individuals in batterers intervention programs and intimate relationships. A deconstruction of this "cultural context of coercion and power" would reveal: that male violence against women is not individual and relationship-based but systematic and intentional; this violence has the social function of maintaining male dominance for all men; and, men's sustained resistance to ending male violence against women, sends the coded message of their stake in that violence.

Over the past twenty-five years, there has been a linguistic regression from the battered women's movement description of violence against women having a clear designation of agency, to a shielding of agency--- "domestic violence," then to a breakdown of the relationship, "mutual combat." How and why has this transition taken place? My guess is in much the same way and for many of the same reasons I altered my words at the Task Force meeting.

The battered women's movement began as a radical initiative by a relatively small number of women for whom agency was clear and well articulated. As the movement spread across the country, it became apparent that male violence against women would have to be addressed as every other crime---as a community problem; not simply a problem for women. What was called for was a coordinated community response. Local task forces answered this call by bringing together advocates and those who shaped policy. One of the challenges of this alliance was that the authority of battered women to describe their reality collided with the language requirements of the reality-definers of the status quo. The tension created by that collision made language choices in those settings as difficult as they were necessary.

I hear from battered women's advocates that they were frightened, confused, and frustrated by the introduction of language that hampered the articulation of their reality and the expression of their dissatisfaction. That fear and frustration makes complete sense to me. In order to protect my privilege as a man, my penchant is to choose the language of accommodation to the status quo. On the other hand, my work as a social justice agent requires me to use the language of change and truth-telling. If I decide to use the language of accommodation, I need to be very conscious about the choice to temporarily camouflage my agenda. Is it a choice driven by my privilege or is it part of a strategy for change? At task force meetings in particular, the challenge for me is to monitor language choices as strategic, alienating or colluding. My choice of gender-neutral language lets me stand among the powerful, because part of being in power is the ability to control the terms of the discourse. Therefore, how I use that podium determines whether my choice is collusion or advocacy.

Language is power. It forges the contours of the problem as well as the solutions. For social change agents, gender-neutral language may have real strategic value---when used to gain access to power. Ultimately, when we obscure men's agency in their violence against women, we thwart solutions, endanger women, and reinforce the status quo. Gender-neutral language is a dangerous ally in ending male violence against women. At best, it is our entree to policy-makers. In the final analysis, we must courageously speak truth to power in order to promote social change and to avoid the erosion of our own integrity.