

Concern for language justified

By Susan Faupel

In the previous issue of the Coalition Commentary, Terry Mutchler analyzed the power of words to heal and hurt, particularly in the legal arena. The article prompted about the use of language to describe the violence imposed on women and children at the hands of abusive men. This discussion led to a follow-up article about how language used in popular media and professional literature to describe violence against women and children.

The Footsteps of our Foremothers

Feminists have long recognized the importance of language. The writings of Marilyn French, Mary Daly, bell hooks, and other feminists have addressed how male-oriented, male-controlled language has contributed to the subjugation of women. These feminist authors and others offer countless examples of how, historically, men have defined words that define the context of women's reality.

Dale Spender and other feminist linguists have studied how language both reflects and shapes our understanding. Spender asserts that "authors inherit vocabulary both deeply and subtly from the author's dominant group."¹

Spender (1980) writes that white men, as the dominant group, influence the

development of language and in many cases actually construct language to support their perception of reality and maintain their dominant status.²

Contemporary Media

A daily scan of contemporary media reveals how language about the rape and battery of women fails to reveal the brutality of these acts and conceals responsibility for the behavior. The crimes are often portrayed through the lens of male entitlement and privilege. Although some articles accurately portray the crimes of rape and battery, the number of distorted references to these crimes and the characterization of the crimes themselves is disturbing.

For example, in a recent article in the Chicago Tribune regarding the kidnapping of an 11-year-old girl by her 27-year-old school principal, the child is described as being “*on the run* with the school principal.”³ Another Tribune article refers to “*their* vehicle.”⁴ Other reports on CNN.com refer to the kidnapper and his victim as “*the pair*” and “*their* whereabouts,” and that “*they* were continuing to travel south.”⁵ All of this language implies that the sixth grade girl somehow, willingly and knowingly exercised freedom of choice in voluntarily leaving with this man, the former principal at her school. What the language fails to portray is that both the law and common sense dictate that an 11-year-old is incapable of making such a decision on her own, that the principal’s action constitute a felony crime of kidnapping, and that the girl is at

great risk of psychological, physical, and sexual harm. In this case, the perpetrator of the crime was later arrested and charged with kidnapping and sexual assault. He had a previous history of arrest for contributing to the delinquency of a minor after being caught partially undressed with a 15-year-old girl. Unfortunately, this was disclosed only after millions of readers had already created the mental image of a young girl as an accomplice in her own abduction and assault.

In an Associated Press article that appeared in the June 5, 2001 edition of Springfield's State Journal Register, an article states "adolescents have the highest rate of rape."⁶ The wording in this sentence implies that rape is a condition that adolescents inherently possess, rather than something that happens *to* them. The obscure language used also fails to indicate whether all adolescents, adolescent boys or adolescent girls have the highest incidence of rape. The reality that females are 14 times more likely to be victims of sexual assault than men⁷, or that 91% of rape and sexual assault victims are female⁸ is not reflected. Finally, this sentence does not assign any responsibility for the occurrence of rape, although we know that adolescent girls are usually raped by adult men and adolescent boys. The truth is that nearly 99% of the offenders in single victim offenses are male.⁹ The article could make these facts clear by saying "adolescent girls are raped in higher numbers than other segments of the population, usually by adolescent and adult males."

In another article, the May 27, 2001 Sunday edition of the Quincy Herald Whig reports the brutal death of a 13-year-old teenage girl near Hannibal, Missouri. The young girl's body was found nude and badly bruised. The article reported that the Sheriff's department had made an arrest and the suspect confessed, but "claims he didn't have sex with her."¹⁰ Earlier in the article, the Sheriff had commented, "She put up a hell of a fight. It was right brutal, I can tell you that." The girl may or may not have been raped, but given that there was, admittedly, a brutal fight, and a badly beaten body, the description of any sexual violation would be more aptly described as *rape* or *sexual assault* rather than as *having sex*. To phrase the possible sexual assault in such a manner leaves the reader to speculate that a consensual sexual encounter may have occurred, rather than a brutal rape.

In *Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes*, Helen Benedict addresses the tendency of the press to misrepresent rape and denigrate victims. Benedict draws on her experiences as a reporter and professor of journalism to examine press coverage in four prominent sex crimes in the 1980's. By analyzing the language of the original news stories and interviewing the reporters, Benedict identifies the tendency of reporters to label victims as either virgins or vamps, a practice she condemns as misleading and harmful. She also illustrates how the press describes female crime victims, especially sex crime victims, using words that are virtually never used for men. Male victims are rarely described in terms of their sexual

attractiveness, while female victims almost always are. Male victims are never defined as hysterical, bubbly, pretty, pert, prudish, vivacious or flirtatious, yet these words were all used to describe the female victims in the cases Benedict examined.¹¹

Professional Literature

Popular media is not the only culprit in the inaccurate portrayal of violence against women and children. Social service and social science literature abounds with information on relationships in which men batter and rape women and children and refer to it as *family violence*. Although the reality is that the vast majority of violence within families is violence that *men* perpetrate against women and children, the term *family violence* is routinely used. It is as if the family is committing violence, or perhaps that some outside force is perpetrating violence upon the entire family. The literature does not indicate who is perpetrating the crime and who is the victim.

Other commonly used terms are *intimate violence* or *partner abuse*. Both of these terms are generally used to refer to violence imposed by men on their female partners to whom they are not married. However, the terms are not reflective of the reality of the problem. They distort the problem and also the responsibility. *Partner abuse* implies that the partners are mutually abusive, rather than the reality that one person is using physical violence to exercise

power and control over another. This language also conceals the fact that the overwhelming majority of such cases involve a man physically abusing a woman.

There are many other terms used that falsely misconstrue the reality of violence:

- *Bullying* is used to refer to the intimidation, threats, sexual harassment and physical assaults that occur in schools.
- *Molestation* is frequently used to refer to the incest, rape, and sexual assault of children.
- *Female circumcision* is used to describe the genital mutilation of women and girls which is tradition in some cultures.

None of these terms accurately describe the reality of these brutal acts of violence. Instead, the distorted language serves to mask, hide, and render invisible violence directed at women and children. The language fails to assign responsibility for the perpetration of the acts. Language that misrepresents the reality of rape and battering contributes to blaming the victim rather than the perpetrator and perpetuates the myths about male violence toward women and children.

Sharon Lamb, a feminist linguist, analyzed the language used in academic descriptions of male violence. She concluded that social scientists use “the ubiquitous passive voice.... which presents acts without agents, harm without guilt.”¹² When men slam women into walls, choke them until they plead for mercy, twist their arms, kick them in the head, stab them with knives, shoot them in the head, force their penis, fingers or objects inside their bodies, and harm them in an endless number of other inventive ways, social scientists call this “family violence”, “spousal abuse” or “domestic violence”. Lamb cites a passage from one book in which the authors describe a brutal scene of a husband beating his wife over the head with a cane and whipping her arms and legs with a hose. After this description, the authors pose the question, “How could a couple inflict such a situation upon one another?”¹³

In her research on language, Lamb reads and analyzes articles in 11 professional journals across five disciplines. She coded sections of the articles for use of language that obscures responsibility for the violence discussed in the articles. She found that half or more of the references to abuse contained sentence structure and language that failed to accurately portray the reality of the abuse. Here are some of Lamb’s examples:

- Passive Voice. This puts the victim of the crime in a passive position as the recipient of the abuse. An example would be “Black women are abused at a disproportionately higher rate than white women.” This

- statement does not indicate how the abuse is occurring, or who is responsible for the abuse. Rather, it places black women in a passive role as the recipient of abuse that comes from unknown origin.
- Acts without Agents. These examples include making reference to “the violent behavior,” “the battery,” or “the abuse,” with no reference to *who* is perpetrating the abuse. These references imply that the responsibility for the acts of violence does not lie within anyone in particular, and hides the fact that *men* are the primary perpetrators of the violent behavior.
 - Victims without Agents. The terms “battered” or “abused” women and abused/battered “wives” imply that women magically *become* battered, abused, or raped. This language fails to reflect *who* inflicts the abuse; the reality that men are the active agents; men rape, men batter, and men abuse women.
 - Failure to Identify Gender. In these examples, there is no indication of the gender of the perpetrator. “She may be beaten when *the assailant* comes calling”; “Why do battered women remain in relationships with abusive *mates*?” There is no reference in this language to the reality that the overwhelming majority of the *mates* in these situations are men, or that the *assailant* is almost always male.¹⁴ Thus, an analysis of rape and other crimes of violence against women as *male violence* is omitted.

In a review of medical and social sciences literature, Melissa Farley and Vanessa Kelly discuss how the normalization of prostitution in the medical and social sciences literature tends to blame the victims of sexual exploitation.¹⁵ They claim that the language recently used to describe prostitution has contributed to confusion regarding whether prostitution should be considered a form of violence against women, and that it covers up the cruelty of prostitution. For example, the term “sex work” implies that prostitution is a job choice that is freely chosen by women. Referring to prostituted women as “commercial sex workers” brings with it an acceptance of what in any other context would be described as sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, rape or sexual abuse. Farley and Kelly assert “If prostitution becomes ‘sex work,’ then the brutal exploitation of women prostituted by pimps becomes an employer-employee relationship. And the predatory, pedophilic purchase of a human being by the john becomes just one more business transaction.”¹⁶ Such language denies the acts of violence being perpetuated against women in prostitution, and hides the impact on the women.

Farley asserts that “women do not *enter* prostitution. They are lured, coerced, bribed, intimidated, threatened and abducted into prostitution.” As with rape, the language used to describe prostitution can influence how prostitution is perceived. Farley prefers the term *prostituted women* rather than *prostitutes*

because it reflects the reality of prostitution as something that is done *to women*, rather than identifying who they are.¹⁷

Spoken Language

In addition to the power of written descriptions, spoken language can also shape how we view violence against women and children. In a 1995 article of the journal Discourse and Society entitled “Dominance and entitlement: the rhetoric men use to discuss their violence towards women,” Adams, Towns and Gavey analyze how men describe their violence towards women. They illustrate that men’s language about women and their relationships with women can have the effect of justifying the men’s dominance over women. The authors give examples from interviews with men who abuse their female partners to highlight the subtle uses of language. For example, one man described his anger as heat: “the temperature just rises, things get heated, and just go over the edge.” It is as if his anger is something outside of himself and occurs beyond his control. Another man talked about how “something just snapped for some reason”, as if something happened *to him* that was again, out of his control. Yet another man talked about his emotions as if they were a powerful explosive pressure: “I keep it inside until it all builds up and builds up and builds up, then I explode.” Again, the mysterious “it” happens and the man loses control. The imaginative response of listeners in each example could include a sense of something happening outside of the men

that causes them to get hotter, snap, and explode. Each example suggests there is a limit to which a man can reasonably be expected to handle pressure, thereby reducing his responsibility for the violent behavior.¹⁸

Language Within the Feminist Movement

Feminists are not immune to the use of false or misleading language. Susan Schechter, who wrote an historical account of the movement to support women who are beaten by the men in their lives, explained that in seeking funding from organizations, activists found it politic to emphasize women's victimization and consequent psychosocial problems. By doing so, they unintentionally conferred on "battered women" the seemingly permanent label of helpless victim and helped to generate a mental health profession claiming expertise in "family violence." Schechter believes these activists diluted their language and shifted the focus from "battered women" to "domestic violence" from fear of alienating the men involved in funding programs, and thus jeopardizing financial support.¹⁹

bell hooks goes a step further to argue that even the term "battered woman" is problematic. She asserts that it is a term that derived from psychologists and sociologists in the literature on domestic violence rather than from a feminist response. hooks writes that "battered woman" places primary emphasis on physical assaults that are continuous, repeated and unrelenting. The focus is

on extreme violence, with little effort to link these cases with the everyday acceptance within intimate relationships of physical abuse that is not extreme....” She continues, “the term ‘battered woman’ is used as though it constitutes a separate and unique category of womanness, as though it is an identify, a mark that sets one apart rather than being simply a descriptive term.” Hooks believes such labels strip women of their dignity and that “even though the use of convenient labels and categories has made it easier to identify problems of physical abuse, it does not mean the terminology should not be critiqued from a feminist perspective and changed if necessary.”²⁰

Language and Social Change

Is it a waste of time for individual women or a collective movement of women to concern themselves with semantics? What difference does it make how people refer to the violence imposed on women at the hands of men? Does it matter whether women are sexual assault victims or rape survivors; abused wives or women beaten by men; prostitutes or prostituted women? Should women and movements concern themselves with whether the issue is called family violence or violence against women; sexual assault or rape?

If language creates reality, and words define real life experiences, then how we choose words and use language has great influence. With words and language, we control minds and hearts; we influence thoughts and opinions.

Andrea Dworkin, who has great difficulty getting her writing published because of the stark truth of her words, asserts, “Words do not have equal weight. We can not afford to overlook the real power and the real meaning of words or the real uses to what words are put.”²¹

Language that minimizes the crimes against women, blames women for their abuse and suffering, and fails to acknowledge responsibility for acts of violence, renders the physical and sexual violence against women and children in our society invisible. Such language sanctions and perpetuates such violence. When this happens, anti-rape activists must address not only the actual crimes, but also the construction of language that perpetuates the crimes. Changes in language can lead the way to social change. Authors must be careful with the words they choose to describe violence against women and children. As feminists and anti-rape activists, we must challenge dishonest language and reveal the false impressions words can convey. We must respond when inaccurate language inaccurately describes crimes against women, and take every opportunity to educate ourselves and others about accurate ways to tell the stories of victims.

As Audre Lorde writes: “In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in the transformation, and to recognize her role as vital within that

transformation...it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it.”²²

¹ Daly, M. (1978). Gyn/Ecology: The metaethics of radical feminism. Boston: Beacon Press.

² Spender, D. (1980). Man-made Language. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

³ “Girl Returns to Indiana But Not Home.” In The Chicago Tribune, 5/13/01.

⁴ “Principal Ordered Held Without bond in Vegas.” In The Chicago Tribune, 5/10/01.

⁵ “Search for Indiana Principal, Female Student Moves South.” On CNN.com, 5/4/01.

⁶ “Pediatricians To Ask Patients About Rape.” In The State Journal Register, 6/5/01.

⁷ Rennison, Callie M. Criminal Victimization, 1998: changes 1997-98 with Trends 1993-98. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 1999.

⁸ Greenfield, Sex Offenses and Offenders, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, 1997.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Death of Teen Girl ‘brutal’.” In The Herald Whig, May 27, 2001.

¹¹ Benedict, H. 1992. Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes. Oxford University Press.

¹² Lamb, Sharon, 1991. “Acts Without Agents: An analysis of linguistic avoidance in journal articles of men who batter women,” American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 61 (2).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Farley, M. and Kelly, V. 2000. “Prostitution: a critical review of the medical and social sciences literature.” Women and Criminal Justice, Vol. 11 (4): p.p. 29-64.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Farley, M. 2001. “Prostitution and Homelessness: the traumatic effects of violence against women.” Workshop presentation, Prostitution: a violent reality of homelessness. Sponsored by The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, May 23, 2001, Chicago, Illinois.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Schechter, S. 1982. Women and Male Violence: The Visions and Struggles of the Battered Women’s Movement. Boston: South End Press.

²⁰ hooks, b. 1989. “violence in intimate relationships: a feminist perspective.” In Talking Back. Boston: South End Press.

²¹ Dworkin, A. 1988. “The Power of Words.” In Letters From A War Zone. New York: E.P. Dutton.

²² Lorde, A. 1984. “The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action.” In Sister Outsider. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.