

Terms of abuse as expression and reinforcement of cultures

Jan Pieter Van Oudenhoven^{a,*}, Boele de Raad^a, Françoise Askevis-Leherpeux^b,
Pawel Boski^c, Geir Scott Brunborg^d, Carmen Carmona^e,
Dick Barelds^a, Charles T. Hill^f, Boris Mlačić^g, Frosso Motti^h,
Beatrice Rammstedtⁱ, Stephen Woods^j

^a University of Groningen, The Netherlands

^b University of Lille3, France

^c University of Gdańsk, Poland

^d University of Bergen, Norway

^e University of Valencia, Spain

^f Whittier College, Whittier, CA, United States

^g Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, Croatia

^h University of Athens, Greece

ⁱ Center for Survey Design and Methodology, Mannheim, Germany

^j Aston University, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Abstract

In this study terms of abuse are investigated in 11 different cultures. Spontaneous verbal aggression is to a certain extent reminiscent of the values of a certain culture. Almost 3000 subjects from Spain, Germany, France, Italy, Croatia, Poland, Great Britain, USA, Norway, Greece, and The Netherlands were asked to write down terms of abuse that they would use given a certain stimulus situation, and in addition, to give their rating of the offensive character of those terms. A total set of 12,000 expressions was collected. The frequencies of the expressions were established, and the total list of expressions was reduced to 16 categories. Results point to some etic taboos, like sexuality and lack of intelligence. On the other hand clear differences across cultures were found, which cannot easily be explained by existing classifications of national cultures. Explanations are provided in terms of dimensions on which the 11 cultures differ.

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1. Introduction

Zidane is the first and only soccer player ever to be sent off during extra time of a World Cup final. This happened after a confrontation with Materazzi, ramming his head into the chest of Materazzi of the Italian team. In his first public comments since the incident, the Algerian-French Zidane explained that repeated harsh insults about his mother and sister had caused him to react as he did, adding that he would “rather have taken a blow to the face than hear that.” Materazzi later confirmed in an interview that his precise words to Zidane were: “I prefer the whore that is your sister.”

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Groningen, Grote Kruisstraat 2/1, 9712 TS Groningen, The Netherlands.
E-mail address: j.p.l.m.van.oudenhoven@rug.nl (J.P. Van Oudenhoven).

This incident illustrates the connectedness of insults, language and culture, but above all the enormous impact of insults if they hit the target with respect to important aspects of his or her culture. Most languages have of thousands of nouns that refer to personal characteristics. Quite a few of them carry a negative evaluative loading (cf. Goldberg, 1982). Words like whore, idiot, and loser possess descriptive capacity on the one hand, and on the other hand may serve pragmatic goals such as in the expression of emotion or in hurting another person. The actual function of such words may depend to a large extent on the type of situation in which it is used.

The interest of this study is in the contents, forms, and functions of *second-person* expressions that are suitable for verbal abuse. Second-person expressions (for example, “You are a traitor”) are often made because of some breach of expectations, and may function to elicit a certain reaction in the addressee. Second-person terms of abuse also can have dramatic impact. In Dutch, for example, “cancer sufferer” is a frequently used term of abuse, possibly because it refers both to the disease and to “grouching” [kankeren]. People who suffer from cancer or who have a family member who suffers from cancer may be deeply touched.

Situations vary strongly with regard to the reasons for abuse and the impact it may have. Someone of an aggressive nature may find passing people on the street reason enough to start a verbal fight. A more understandable situation to fly off at someone would be if a person bowls you down, walks on without any excuse, and leaves you with your broken purchases on the ground.

The different functions of interest that may be distinguished in a situation like the latter are represented in a frequently used model of communication (Schulz von Thun, 1977). This model distinguishes the descriptive, the expressive, the appealing, and the relational aspects of communication (cf. De Raad, 2002). The descriptive aspect, for example, represents what you might say about the person who bowled you down. The expressive aspect represents how emotional or angry you are. The appealing aspect represents what you try to evoke in that person. Finally, the relational aspect represents how you relate to each other. In the example above, the relational aspect presumably refers to the rules involved in such an encounter and the shared values.

The second-person expressions usually refer to problematic moments in the ongoing social process. People often try to repair such problematic situations by using certain words or labels. For example, if a person violates social order by yelling at a respectable old man, that person may be apt to earn the label “impertinent”. This label may reintroduce order by discrediting the person who yells and by justifying social reactions to him (Goffman, 1976; Much & Shweder, 1978; Scott & Lyman, 1968). The expressions used for restoration thus both relate to what is going on in the event and to a background of shared rules and culture.

Adjectives and verbs have – more than nouns – dominated descriptive personality psychology, because these categories approach somewhat better the ideal of a value-free vocabulary than nouns (Saucier, 2003). Because of their evaluative loading, however, personality-related type nouns (hero, imbecile, whore) seem to be particularly relevant for the *oral* communication situation, where the pragmatic side becomes more important. The descriptive side of nouns is, however, virtually as rich and diverse as the typical personality descriptive adjectives: they cover most of the ground of the Big Five domains, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Intellectual autonomy (cf. De Raad, 1992). Their pragmatic side, in addition, enables powerful and effective ways to communicate. For example, nouns objectify in ways adjectives cannot. The use of nouns gives the impression one wants to convey of a person a more definite character. “If we are disappointed at Jane’s lack of appreciation we can call her *ungrateful*, or solidify it a step further and call her *an ungrateful person*. But if we call her an *ingrate* we put the brand on her: the noun implies that the world puts people like this in a class by themselves” (Bolinger, 1980, p. 79). Personality type nouns can be used for corrective and restorative purposes: they may function as an appeal to the person’s moral sense or have the effect of excommunicating the person referred to.

In the present study there is a specific interest in the relationship between *culture* and the second-person expressions chosen for the restoration of such problematic events. Do people from different cultures follow different restorative schemes, and do people from different cultures use different types of expressions? Moreover, what do the types of expressions tell us about particular characteristics of the culture?

1.1. *Defining verbal abuse*

What is verbal abuse? According to dictionaries it is “scolding someone soundly; tossing hurtful names at someone” (Koenen & Drewes, 1985), “using profanity, demeaning talk, or threatening statements” (Wikipedia), or

“characterizing by insulting or coarse language” (Collins Dictionary, 1979). In his dictionary of abusive language, Heestermans (1989) states that a term of abuse is only real if it is expressed with the necessary aggression. Therefore, it tells about the person who is using abusive language. But the person who uses abusive language also wants to affect the other, preferably at a sensitive spot. Abusive language forms an effort to make someone despicable. An important synonym in this respect is insult, which is described as “injuring someone’s honor, good name, or reputation” (Van Dale, 1992).

It is especially the performative aspect, indicating what is done with using language, i.e. affecting the person, injuring someone’s honor, that makes abusive language of cultural or cross-cultural interest. If someone tries to injure the honor of another person, individual values and common values are at stake (cf. Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002).

1.2. *Culture and abusive language*

Abusive language has existed in all times and in all cultures. In ancient times the Greeks had a name for non-Greeks, namely “barbaroi”, meaning something like “babblers” (Janssens, 1984). The Tewa-Indians from South-America, the Arabs, the Dutch, the Chinese, all are familiar with abusive language and terms of abuse (cf. Kuiper, 1992). The phenomenon may be called an *etic*, a cross-cultural, universal phenomenon (Berry, 1969). It is suggested that the way abusive language is used is the same everywhere.

In addition to those common characteristics there are diversities. It is particularly in those diversities that culture seems to play a role. The referents of terms in different cultures of abuse are of various kinds, such as diseases (e.g. in Dutch: tyfuslijer [typhoid sufferer]); intimate body parts (e.g. Arschloch/asshole, in German and English, respectively), immoral behavior, religion, faeces and relationships. At this point differences from culture to culture can be observed (Van Oudenhoven, 2002, pp. 43–44; Van Sterkenburg, 2001, pp. 188–193). So, while abusive language may be an *etic*, its manifestation may be an *emic*, a culture-specific element.

It has been suggested that abusive language is to some extent a male habit (Brouwer & Schenk van Witzen, 1983). This may vary, however, according to the masculinity or femininity of a certain culture (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). In masculine societies there are strict male–female roles. The more masculine a society, the more the abusive language is expected to be a male habit.

The relationship between culture and values has been a kernel topic throughout in cross-cultural psychology (cf. Hofstede, 1991; Van Oudenhoven, 2002). Language, both verbal and non-verbal language, as a main vehicle of culture, forms a serviceable object for the study of that relationship. In general, language is to be considered as essential in the study of how values are expressed. On the non-verbal side, Morris, Collett, Marsch, and O’Shaughnessy (1979) studied origins and distributions of gestures, and found, for example, that the insulting so-called “cuckold” gesture (expressing lack of virility) is especially observed in the collectivistic part of southern Europe, and not in the North. Virility as a value is thus considered as more prevalent in Southern-Europe. On the verbal side, Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, and Schwarz (1966) found in a study in USA, for example, that – again – Southern boys felt more easily injured in their male reputation than Northern boys, after they were bowled over and verbally abused by other men. Virility is valued differently in different regions.

1.3. *Values and abusive language*

We assume that terms of abuse are effective as insults to the degree that they refer to violations of *important general* and *normative values*. If values were not important, violating them would not be taken seriously. If they were not general within a cultural community, they would not be effective towards individuals of the community who do not share the same values, let alone towards individuals who do not know the existence of the values. Some values may be important within a community because they refer to desirable characteristics, for instance creativity or spirituality. However, these are not normative in the sense that they do prescribe that people within the community should be creative or spiritual. Therefore, they cannot touch a sensitive spot.

Which values could be responsible for different styles of abusive language? *Virility* is an obvious candidate. It is described in terms of “reproductive capacity” and “being tough” (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002). Someone may get insulted because of lack of virility. In the case of the “cuckold” gesture, for example, it is conveyed that the insulted person is not a real man, because his wife is promiscuous. The man’s honor is at stake.

Hofstede (1980, 1991) has distinguished five dimensions in terms of which cultures may differ, two of which could be relevant in the context of abusive language, namely collectivism–individualism and masculinity–femininity. In *individualistic* cultures people are considered responsible for their own behaviors; personal freedom and autonomy are valued. In *collectivistic* cultures people are considered responsible for behaviors of the groups (families) to which they belong; social networks and family reputations are valued. In the latter type of cultures people may easily feel offended by allegations regarding family. *Masculinity* implies an emphasis on a traditional male orientation in which assertiveness, achievement, and success are valued. It is related to the concept of *mastery*, in Schwartz's configuration of national values (Schwartz, 1994). Abusive language in typical masculine (or mastery) cultures may well refer to societal failure.

Being non-successful in society may also be due to physical or mental abnormality. Throughout history, handicapped people have been categorized negatively, and such handicaps have formed a productive resource for abusive language (e.g. *imbecile*, *dwarf*).

The values relevant for the understanding of abusive language may also interact, such as between masculinity-related values and individualistic/collectivistic values. Norway, Italy, The Netherlands, Great Britain, and Germany, for example, are seen as relatively individualistic (Hofstede, 1991). All five countries emphasize individual honor rather than family honor. On masculinity, however, Germany, Italy and Great Britain, on the one hand, and Norway and The Netherlands, on the other hand, are found to be opposites. For the Germans, Brits and Italians achievement and autonomy represent important – individualistic – values, but, being relatively masculine countries, societal failure is considered as more destructive than in typical feminine countries such as Norway and The Netherlands, according to Hofstede (1991).

In a previous study of abuse terms in three cultures (Spain, Germany and The Netherlands) we indeed found a clear Spanish specialization in terms of references to *family and relations* and *virility*, and a high frequency of words referring to *male achievement* in Germany (De Raad, Van Oudenhoven, & Hofstede, 2005).

In this study, terms of abuse are collected in 11 different cultures. Special interest is in the most frequently used insulting words in the different cultures, in the content of those words, and in the relationship between the distinct insulting vocabularies and values relevant in those cultures. We expect that terms of abuse referring to family honor are found in collective cultures, in particular; to societal reputation and success in masculine (mastery) cultures, in particular; to virility in “virility” cultures; and to deviance in all cultures. The previous study also pointed to differences in taboos with respect to genitals, the anal zone and excrements, physical and mental abnormality, diseases, being dirty or lack of hygiene, being an animal as compared to being a human being, and to impoliteness or lack of civilization. Therefore, we will also look at possible differences regarding these taboos.

For this study 11 Western countries were chosen that are known to differ along the dimensions individualism–collectivism, masculinity–femininity, and virility. Those countries are Croatia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, and the United States. Of these 11, Spain and Greece have been found to represent the more collectivistic cultures, in contrast to the more individualistic cultures of France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Norway, The Netherlands and the US, which do not differ significantly at this point. Croatia and Poland can also be considered to be more collectivistic, due to their socialist political history, although we know of no research concerning the dimension of individualism–collectivism in Croatia and Poland. Germany, Italy, Great Britain, and the US, in turn, have been found to represent the more masculine cultures, and Norway and The Netherlands the more feminine cultures, with Spain and France holding positions in between (Hofstede, 1991). The Mediterranean countries Spain and Greece would represent the cultures that value virility, as opposed to the Northern countries Norway and The Netherlands.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 2994 (41% male; 59% female) students volunteered in this study. Of these, almost 70% were students of social sciences. Their average age was 22 years. The number of participants varied from country to country: Croatia ($N = 421$), The Netherlands ($N = 403$), United States ($N = 382$), Poland ($N = 366$), Germany ($N = 351$), Spain ($N = 282$), Greece (214), Great Britain (200), Norway ($N = 167$), Italy ($N = 117$) and France ($N = 91$).

2.2. Material and procedure

Most participants were recruited during breaks of classes and in the restaurants of the university buildings. Both males and females were approached. The goal of the study was explained to the students in advance. Next, the participants were provided with a brief form that contained the following sketch of a situation:

“Imagine you are in the following situation, or try to imagine a similar situation that you have experienced yourself: A man/woman (a male/female friend of yours) rudely bumps into to you; he/she turns towards you but he/she gives no sign that he/she is sorry. You are furious. What do you say to this man/woman (your friend)?”

The participants were requested to write down the first five terms of abuse that occurred to them. After writing down those words, the subjects had to indicate for each word how offensive it was. They could express this on a five-point scale, running from “1” (not very offensive) to “5” (very offensive).

Finally there were questions about their age, gender, education and native language. Participants whose native language was not spoken in any of the 11 nations were not included in the analysis.

2.3. Design

We used a 2 (male versus female participant) \times 2 (sex of the target) \times 2 (relationship to the target (he or she is unknown to the subject versus he or she is a friend of the target) design. This means that male and female respondents judge one target – randomly presented to them – who is an unknown rudely walking male or female person, or a rudely walking male or female friend. Since there were only minor differences on abuse terms, dependent on whether the walking person was unknown or a friend, we do not make any distinction in the results in this respect.

3. Results

3.1. Most frequent terms per country

The 2994 respondents generated a total of approximately 12,000 terms of abuse. Not all of those expressions were “deviant type nouns”; a small proportion consisted of insulting adjectives (e.g. ‘rude’) or verbs (e.g. ‘I shit on your parents’). All exclamations (e.g. ‘Que pasa?’), curses (e.g. ‘go to hell’), and utterances (e.g. ‘oeps!’) were excluded from the analysis.

First, for each country the five most frequently used words were tabulated. Some of the words were versions of the same root, such as *cabrón* and *cabronazo* or *ass* and *asshole*; they were treated as identical. Many other words or expressions were quite similar in meaning, as *imbecile* and *idiot*, or *Blödmann* and *Dummkopf*; those words were treated as synonymous as well. Table 1 gives the frequencies of the most frequently used words of abuse for each country, separately for male and female targets. The two first authors performed this tabulation. Expressions were only put together where direct agreement between the authors was reached.

The frequencies in Table 1 provide strikingly distinct abusive language portraits for the 11 countries involved. In Croatia it is the male genital (*kurac*), in France the female genital (*connard/connasse/con/conne*) to which terms of abuse refer. In Dutch, verbal abuse is primarily in terms of male and female genitals. In German and American English, the most frequently terms of abuse are ‘anal’ in character. In Spain and Italy, the most frequently used words refer to mental abnormality; in Greece they refer to stupidity. In Poland the terms refer to a lack of culture (*co za kultura*) or peasant background (*cham*) as an indicator of lack of civilization. In Norwegian, it is first of all the devil that is the topic of verbal abuse (*faen, jævel* or *satan*). This is certainly the most distinct cultural reference, which undeniably points to a strong Christian influence on Norwegian culture. A more general and systematic view of the relation between terms of abuse and culture across the 11 languages is presented in the next section where all terms are organized in 16 categories.

3.2. Differences in categories of terms of abuse across countries

The 11 languages make use of a variety of referents, metaphorically or not, in order to enhance one’s anger with the person or to evoke a reaction in that person. Comparisons with genitals and anal parts, references to mental

Table 1
The five most frequently used terms of abuse in each of 11 cultures

Female target		Male target	
USA			
Bitch	57	Ass(hole)	80
Ass(hole)	41	Bitch	25
Rude	21	Rude	25
Stupid	19	Jerk	24
Idiot/moron	12	Idiot/moron	16
Total	150	Total	170
Spain			
Imbecil/subnormal/idiota	55	Imbecil/subnormal/idiota	97
Tonta/estupida	32 (stupid)	Gilipollas (prick)	62
Maleducado	28	Tonto/estupido	45
Gilipollas	25	Cabron (male goat)	43
Cabrón	22	Capullo (greenhorn)	39
Total	162	Total	286
Germany			
Bloed/dumm	150 (stupid)	Idiot/depp	172
Kuh	99 (cow)	Arsch(loch)	169
Schlampe	70 (slut)	Bloed(mann)	66
Arsch(loch)	57 ass (hole)	Penner (tramp)	66
Idiotin/depp	54	Wichser (jerk)	54
Total	430	Total	527
Italy			
Cretina/imbecile/idiota	23	Cretina/imbecile/idiota	35
Stronza	23 (shit)	Cazzo	19
Vafanculo	20 (anal goer)	Vafanculo	23
Maleducata	15 (ill-bred)	Maleducato	18
Cazzo	9 (scrotum)	Stronzo	15
Total	90	Total	110
Great Britain			
Bitch	39	Twat/cunt	28
Rude	19	Dick(head)/prick	22
Cow	17	Idiot	22
Cunt/twat	19	Wanker	22
Idiot/moron	12	Ass(hole)/arsehole	12
Total	96	Total	106
Greece			
Blakas/elithia/more	40 (stupid)	Blakas/elithia/more	100
Malaka	19 (masturbator)	Malaka	31
Zoo	17 (animal)	Stravos/tuflos (blind)	30
Kargiola/poutana	14 (whore)	Zoo	13
Agenes	13 (rude)	Agenes	12
Total	103	Total	186
The Netherlands			
Hoer/bitch/slet	177	Klootzak/lul/eikel (prick)	317
Trut/doos	149 (twat)	Sukkel	92
Kutwif	103 (twat woman)	Idioot/mongool	58
Idioot/mongool	23	Homo/flikker (gay)	26
Sukkel	17 (stupid)	Aso (asocial)	22
Total	469	Total	515

Table 1 (Continued)

Female target		Male target	
Norway			
Faen/jævel/satan	60 (devil)	Faen/jævel/satan	59
Idiot/mongo	31	Idiot/mongo	55
Bitch/hore	28	Dust	26
Dust	17 (stupid)	Penis/scrotum	17
Kjerring (hag)	15	Drittsekk (dirtbag)	16
Total	151	Total	173
France			
Connard/connasse/conne	46 (cunt)	Connard/connasse/con	66
Putain/salope/greluche	35 (whore)	Abruti/imbecile	15
Petasse	10 (anal goer)	Bouffon (fool)	7
Malappris/impoli	6 (ill-bred)	Impoli/malappris	6
Pauvre file/type	5 (poor guy)	Putain/salope/greluche	5
Total	92	Total	99
Croatia			
Kurac	84 (prick)	Kurac	86
Glupačo	78 (stupid)	Kreten(u)/idiote	130
Kravo	35 (cow)	Budale (fool)	42
Pička ti materina	25 (your mother's pussy)	Glup(ane)	51
Glupa	25 (stupid)	Seljačino (peasant)	21
Total	247	Total	330
Poland			
Co za kultura	25 (ill-bred)	Cham (peasant)	22
Kurwa	14 (whore)	Kurwa	22
Krowa	6 (cow)	Co za kultura	20
Gup(ek)	6 (stupid)	Kretyn/idiot	12
Idiot	6	Gup(ek)	7
Total	57	Total	83
Total female targets	2047	Total male targets	2585

abnormalities, stupidity, social inadequacy, and attributions of sexually abnormal behaviors, turned out to be preferred forms for achieving effects. In order to arrive at a full description of the contents of the terms of abuse, a list of categories of referents was constructed, based on observations of the complete list of terms of abuse. In several cases an expression was counted in two or more categories. *Crazy cow*, for example, refers to an animal and to mental abnormality. These referents were assigned to the categories 'animals' and 'mental abnormality'.

Starting with the first expression in the list the first category or categories were formed. For each next expression it was decided whether it would fit the existing categories or whether new categories had to be constructed. A set of 28 categories was thus generated. Twelve of them finally turned out to contain only a few concrete referents per country or none at all. These concerned among others ideology (nazi), names (Henry), age (old tart), substance use (junk), ethnicity (Jew), food (Bratwurst = sausage), objects (bag of hay), plants (mushroom), outer characteristics (fat woman) or roles (mother). They were taken together in an other category.

The complete list of terms of abuse contained a large diversity of referents. Table 2 encompasses the final list of 9528 terms used to accommodate the referents collected in the 11 languages.

The eleven countries involved in this study were expected to differ along the dimensions individualism–collectivism, masculinity–femininity (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1991), and Virility. On the first dimension, Greece, Spain and Croatia, and possibly Poland were expected to some extent to represent the collectivism pole, and the other seven countries the individualism pole. For this reason, abusive language in the first block of countries was expected to

Table 2
Frequencies of insulting categories per 100 respondents

Language	Dutch	French	Croatian	American English	British English	Polish	Norwegian	Italian	Greek	German	Spanish	Total
Number of respondents	403	91	421	382	200	366	167	117	214	351	282	2994
Genitals	175	131	42	6	60	1	38	74	8	10	37	49
Mental abnormality	36	43	56	9	25	7	57	71	36	74	59	40
Sexual actions	4	4	81	55	47	7	10	43	41	5	29	32
Stupid	18	0	36	8	5	2	26	11	76	74	40	29
Social inadequacy	55	60	8	9	15	1	22	25	18	72	34	28
Anal and excrements	6	36	7	36	10	2	20	68	43	79	19	26
Animals	21	9	34	1	14	4	16	9	27	78	25	24
Bitch	57	41	9	31	26	9	24	11	11	28	11	24
Family and relations	2	5	59	7	10	1	4	6	7	7	46	17
Not educated	3	26	9	14	16	19	2	45	24	10	35	16
Male sexual inadequacy	11	11	0	8	17	1	10	40	9	16	2	9
Physical handicap	2	2	6	4	6	9	1	4	37	15	7	9
Devil/satan	0	0	3	0	0	0	74	0	0	0	0	5
Rural background	2	0	7	0	1	8	0	15	6	13	0	5
Diseases	17	2	2	0	1	6	1	0	0	1	1	4
Dirtiness	8	4	1	1	2	0	14	0	7	1	0	3
Total	417	376	361	187	251	79	317	422	351	483	343	317

discredit referents of social networks (*family and relations*), as opposed to the other block. *Family and relations* is rather typical for Croatia and Spain; for Croatians it primarily consists of insulting someone's mother by using sexual terms, whereas in Spain it occurs by also insulting other relatives and by suggesting that someone's partner commits adultery (*cabron*). Table 2 confirms this for Croatia and Spain, but remarkably not for Greece. Reference to adultery only occurs in Spain.

On the second dimension, Italy, Germany, and Great Britain (more masculine) were expected to differ from Norway and The Netherlands (more feminine). Correspondingly, referents of abuse that discredit societal success (*social inadequacy*) should be more frequent in the first three countries than in the latter two countries. This was only confirmed for the German culture (see Table 2), and clearly not for the Dutch culture which, different from what was expected, does seem to value societal success. Next, masculinity would be reflected in an appreciation for male sexual achievement (*male sexual inadequacy*). This would apply, in particular, to male targets in the first three countries (see Table 3). The data (references to masturbation) confirm this idea. The last dimension, virility, emphasizes male reputation and reproductive capacity.

Virility refers to typical manhood as a matter of honor in the traditional sense. Virility was supposed to be more valued in the slightly more collectivistic Mediterranean countries Spain and Greece. It is related to *machismo*: masculinity, domination and courage are attributes of this concept. The kernel of this threat is expressed well in the verbal equivalent of the "cuckold" gesture, namely "cabron", literally meaning *billy-goat*. The expression is used to insult a man who allows another man to have sex with his wife and does not do anything about it, but it is also more generally used as an equivalent to *asshole*, *bastard* or worse. As we saw above, only in Spain we found evidence for this form of male honor. The typical meaning of "cabron" stands out in the Spanish abusive vocabulary, thus supporting the distinctive virility value in that language.

So far we focused on categories with respect to which we had explicit expectations. As Table 2 shows, other categories of abusive language also vary largely across countries. Reference to *genitals* is typical for the Dutch, the French, the Italians and the British, but is rarely used by the Poles and the Americans. References to *sexual actions* seem to occur in all countries, but mostly in Croatia and USA, and very little in France and The Netherlands. Words like *bitch* are found everywhere, but in The Netherlands and France, in particular. Apparently, sexuality is somehow a taboo in all countries, but seems to be an obsession in The Netherlands. Germany distinguishes itself from other nations by a high reference to the *anal zone and excrements* and to *animals*. This combination suggests a preoccupation with purity, because both excrements and animals, e.g. *Sau* (pig) have impure connotations.

Table 3
Frequencies of insulting categories per 100 respondents towards male and female targets

Language	Dutch		French		Croatian		American English		British English		Polish		Norwegian		Italian		Greek		German		Spanish		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Number of respondents	205	198	42	49	212	209	189	193	100	100	195	171	85	82	57	60	127	87	199	152	141	141	2994
Genitals	200	150	167	100	43	40	6	6	93	27	3	0	41	34	119	30	12	3	4	19	50	23	49
Mental abnormality	50	22	64	24	69	44	11	8	31	19	9	5	69	44	89	53	31	43	92	51	73	44	40
Sexual actions	4	3	5	4	78	85	57	53	57	36	9	5	12	7	46	40	43	38	7	3	39	19	32
Stupid	4	32	0	0	23	50	5	10	3	7	1	4	31	21	7	15	79	72	56	99	57	23	29
Social inadequacy	93	15	79	45	7	9	9	8	18	11	3	0	27	17	11	38	20	15	72	71	39	30	28
Anal and excrements	10	3	33	39	8	6	47	25	15	5	4	1	19	21	86	52	56	23	91	64	20	18	26
Animals	23	19	7	10	22	47	2	1	0	28	3	6	15	16	5	12	23	33	35	134	23	26	24
Bitch	10	105	0	76	1	17	16	45	3	48	10	9	7	41	2	20	4	22	1	64	1	20	24
Family and relations	3	1	10	2	62	56	9	4	18	2	2	0	6	1	9	3	10	3	12	1	57	35	17
Not educated		6	29	24	7	10	15	13	11	20	20	18	2	1	56	35	24	24	9	12	33	37	16
Male sexual inadequacy	21	1	24	0	0	0	14	1	28	5	3	0	19	1	42	38	13	2	28	0	4	0	9
Physical handicap	4	1	0	4	8	4	3	5	7	5	6	12	0	1	4	5	46	25	11	22	8	6	9
Devil/satan	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	74	73	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	5
Rural background	3	0	0	0	10	4	0	0	0	1	12	4	0	0	19	12	3	9	14	12	0	0	5
Diseases	19	15	2	2	3	1	0	1	0	1	6	6	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	4
Dirtiness	9	8	2	6	0	1	0	1	0	3	0	0	16	12	0	0	9	5	1	1	0	0	3
Total	454	380	421	337	347	376	194	181	284	218	88	68	340	293	495	353	374	318	431	553	406	280	317

Lack of education is an issue in all four Mediterranean countries, Italy, Spain, France, and Greece. Mentioning someone *physically handicapped* is a taboo in Greece; it is somehow related to the reference to *diseases* in The Netherlands. The most uniquely characteristic term of abuse, referring to the *devil* was found in the Norwegian sample.

Furthermore there are three widely used categories of terms (*mental abnormality*, *social inadequacy*, and *stupidity*) that refer in a general sense to being mentally or socially no-good, inadequate, incapacitated, abnormal, of suffering from a lack of competence. All those terms describe an inadequate action in a broad sense and enable the expression of annoyance: *imbecile*, *stupid*, *retarded*, *abnormal*, *asocial*, *loser*, etc.

Remarkably, the Poles, and the Americans – to a lesser degree – use fewer terms of abuse than the other nine nations. Apparently in these two cultures using any abuse term is taboo. This explanation is supported by the enormously high frequency of excuse words both in Polish and American English.

3.3. Different reactions due to gender of the target and the actor

Overall women receive fewer insults than men (see Table 3). In the four Mediterranean countries, again, women are less confronted with insults, in particular. This may be related to the relatively higher value of being well educated. Only in Germany and Croatia do women receive more insults than men. There are not only differences in frequencies, but also in contents. Obviously, women are more often referred to as bitches, whereas men are more often called jerks. More interesting is the reversal of the mental abnormality and stupidity categories. Men more easily receive the more intense insult labels, such as *idiot*, or *moron*, whereas women are more apt to receive the milder qualification *stupid*. Apparently, women are approached in a milder way. Males are more genitally offended, whereas women are more often compared with animals (in particular *cows*).

Whereas women receive fewer insults than men, they are approximately equally active users of them. This may be caused by the tendency of males to be inhibited to offend women for politeness reasons, while women do not feel that inhibition towards men. In general, men and women use the same terms. There is one robust tendency which we found in all 10 cultures (in France there were too few male respondents to be able to make a comparison). Women use the terms *idiot* and *stupid* 52 times per 100 respondents whereas men use the same terms only 31 times per 100 respondents. This is a strong indication that women in all cultures consider intelligence as an important value.

Finally, we examined whether the offensiveness of the most frequent terms varied across countries, gender of the target, or gender of the actor. The most important result is that women attribute more offensiveness to almost all terms of abuse than men.

4. Discussion

What are the different types of verbal abuse, and do people from different cultures exploit different categories of verbal abuse? The abusive vocabulary, consisting of approximately 12,000 terms turned out to be more than an alphabetical list. Some 16 different categories of abusive language can be distinguished, which together enable the accommodation of the large majority of the terms of abuse collected in this study. These categories are characterized by their referents; those referents include genitals, mental abnormality, sexual actions, being stupid, social reputation, anal features, being a bitch, animals, family and relations, not being well educated, male sexual inadequacy, physical handicaps, being a devil, being a rural type, diseases, and dirtiness. Most of the categories play a role in most languages, and some seem to have a function in only one (devil, diseases, dirtiness, physical handicaps) or two (family and relations) languages. The latter observation forms a first confirmative answer to the question about cultural differences: cultures indeed differ with respect to abusive language. The cross-cultural differentiation is further made explicit in Tables 1–3. Table 2 conveys a clearly Norwegian specialization in terms of the dark side of Christianity, the *devil*. It reflects the anxiety about what may happen to us after we die. In this sense it is possible that it refers to little devils who resided in forests in pre-Christian times. In further reactions we found additional evidence for this anxiety in the high frequency of references to hell, more than in any other language.

Norway has been a relatively homogeneous protestant community in relative isolation, so that this unique feature could develop. Spanish culture is unique by its specialization in terms of references to *virility*. Spain, together with Croatia, is characterized by references to *family honor*. This finding may be understood as being expressive of the

collective orientation of the Croatian and Spanish culture, or the influence of the Catholic religion in those cultures that highly values the family. Further, but less strong, are unique characteristic references to physical handicaps in Greece and diseases in The Netherlands.

Expressing terms related to sexuality is to some extent a taboo in all cultures and may be seen as etc. The forms of expressing, however, vary somehow across cultures. In The Netherlands and France this occurs by referring to genitals and bitches; in Italy, Great Britain and USA by referring to sexual actions and bitches; and the Croatians are more focused on sexual actions and genitals.

References to lack of intelligence or wisdom occur in all cultures. They may consist of harsh forms which refer to levels of mental retardation, e.g. *idiot* or *moron*, or milder forms (mainly *stupid*, *blöd*, *tonto*, *dom*, etc.). This research showed an interesting gender difference both with respect to the target and the user. Women tend to receive less harsh qualifications than men: They will be called stupid rather than idiot. On the other hand, as users women apply terms referring to a lack of intelligence more often than men. This is in accordance with a large international study into the preferred characteristics of potential mates (Buss, 1989). Data from 33 countries in that study showed that females valued intelligence-related characteristics of potential mates more than males. Males valued physical attractiveness and relative youth in potential mates more than females across cultures.

Another relatively favorite type of insulting is the *anal* vocabulary which is widely used in Germany and Italy, but also quite common in Greece, USA and France. It is almost absent in Poland, The Netherlands and Croatia. The German *anal* orientation may be understood as a breach of what used to be referred to as the German culture of “Reinheit” [Cleanness] (Douglas, 2002; Labrie, 2001). Additional evidence for the German preoccupation with cleanness is given by the high frequency of terms like *Schwein* and *Sau* (pig) which clearly refer to unclean animals.

Animals also are an important category of abuse terms, although their application varies strongly. They are scarcely used by the American respondents and frequently by the German and Croatian respondents. They refer to being a subhuman being which may mean that the offended person is seen as stupid (e.g. *stupid cow*), as unclean (e.g. *dirty swine*) or as uneducated (e.g. *uncultured bear*).

The current study largely replicates the findings of the previous study among a smaller sample of male students which included only three cultures and did not include female targets (De Raad et al., 2005). When we consider the results for the male targets, Spain again was found to score high on *family relations* and *virility*, Germany on *social inadequacy*, *male sexual inadequacy* and *anal vocabulary*, and The Netherlands on *diseases* and *genitals*. The main difference concerns the high Dutch score on social inadequacy in the present study, which suggests that The Netherlands is less feminine and more achievement oriented than was expected.

As in the previous study, the findings were produced given a single representative anecdote. However, we varied the gender of the target, the gender of the user, and the relation to the target. The gender of the target did matter, and so did, but to a minor degree, the gender of the user. The influence of the relation to the target was slim. Moreover we extended the number of cultures from 3 to 11, including some smaller linguistic cultures. Although all were western cultures we did find considerable cultural differences, not only in the frequency of the different categories, but also in the willingness or reluctance to use terms of abuse. The Poles showed the lowest level of willingness to use insulting terms. It would be important to find out whether we may replicate this finding in a future study. A second task for future research would be the addition of new and distinct non-western languages and cultures. Another question is whether the category system will function to accommodate terms of abuse that are generated, when we vary stimulus situations. A more important task is to find satisfactory theoretical explanations to the empirically found differences in references to values. The Hofstede dimensions are not specific enough to explain the differences. Considering the linguistic and cultural kinship between Germany and The Netherlands, how can we explain why genital references are so abundant in Dutch culture and anal references almost lacking, whereas we find the opposite pattern in Germany? Why are references to lack of education so important in Mediterranean countries but not so in Northern European countries? Another example could be the references to diseases. Is health a particular Dutch value, emphasizing the Calvinistic appreciation of a healthy body to accommodate the divine soul? Why is the Norwegian psyche preoccupied with issues of devil and hell, and none of the other cultures, some of which have protestant cultures? Would we find a similar result in other Scandinavian countries? Apparently, terms of abuse expose aspects of an implicit culture that still have to be made explicit. It is interesting to find answers to those questions, and in addition to try to complete this type of study through the inclusion of more and different stimulus situations that may all give rise to verbal abuse, and through the addition of new cultures.

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