

The Hidden Benefits of Swearing: Going Beyond the Tip of The Iceberg

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For a long time, swearing has had a bad reputation. Being supposedly aggressive and overtly proletarian, swearing is a behaviour relegated to the 'naughty step'. Despite the negative social connotations and consequences, swearing remains a popular behaviour in daily life. In this talk, I propose that swearing has previously been misconstrued and simplified. This talk takes, as its starting point, the concept of swearing as an emotional behaviour. Drawing on a thematic analysis on data from 17 semi-structured interviews and 3 focus groups, I will discuss the use of swearing to achieve positive intra- and interpersonal outcomes in a manner which challenges perceptions in the utility of swearing. From this analysis, a reoccurring theme for >94% of participants was the protection of one's own and significant other's wellbeing. Active swearing use yields change to emotions at an individual, dyadic, and group level. Swearing can allow us to contain overwhelming feelings, reduce or increase emotions at will, and express otherwise unknowable information about one's internal state. This evidence confirms and extends previous research by showing how swearing is understood to influence our subjective experiences. Further, preliminary findings from a study assessing the influence of swearing on psychophysiology suggests that, after socially painful experiences, swearing reduces heart rate variability (HRV) compared to not swearing. Reductions in HRV suggests that swearing moves our bodies away from the fight-or-flight response and into the rest-and-digest response, a phase in which the body relaxes and heals once stressful events have passed. I will discuss implications of this work for theory, research, and life beyond the white walls of the academy.