

DISRESPECTFUL FEMALE: THE PROBLEM WITH CALLING WOMEN FEMALES

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to the people in my life who have told me not to give up too soon. My family who has encouraged me to keep in the pursuit of knowledge and bettering myself. I will keep going. My friends who over the past few years have celebrated with me by indulging in late night drives for a crisp McDonalds Coke, trips to the nail salon, and staying up watching movies till I can't keep my eyes open any later (9:30...10:30 if I'm feeling froggy). I appreciate the understanding you have all shown me and I promise eventually I won't have homework as a killjoy to all our plans. Thank you to the professors I have had over the last few years who encouraged me along the journey and pushed me to question and explore what makes me curious. I won't stop learning.

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TABLE OF COTENTS

	Page
List of Figures	vii
Abstract	viii
Chapter One	1
Introduction	1
Chapter Two.....	4
Literature Review	4
<i>Saying Female</i>	4
<i>Performing Female</i>	7
<i>Power in Calling</i>	11
<i>Ideology</i>	13
Theoretical Framework	15
<i>Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)</i>	15
<i>CDA in Relation to Gender Stereotypes</i>	16
<i>CDA in Relation to Ideologies</i>	17
<i>Cultivation Theory</i>	18
<i>Cultivation Theory in Relation to Gender, Media, and Identity</i>	18
<i>Cultivation Theory in Relation to Ideology</i>	19
Chapter Three.....	20
Methodologies	20
<i>Sample Selection</i>	21
<i>Analysis procedures</i>	23
Chapter Four	24
Content Analysis	24
<i>Book</i>	24
<i>Song Lyrics</i>	25
Interviews	29
Chapter Five.....	39
Discussion	39
Conclusion.....	41

Appendix A.....	42
References.....	44

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Figure 1	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Figure 2	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Figure 3	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Figure 4	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Figure 5	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Figure 6	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Figure 7	Error! Bookmark not defined.

ABSTRACT

DISRESPECTFUL FEMALE: THE PROBLEM WITH CALLING WOMEN FEMALES

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The work done in this paper seeks to critically look at the usage of the word “female” as a replacement word for “woman” in a way that points out the inherent disrespect that is ingrained into the usage of that word. Utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis influenced by feminist theory, queer theory, and critical race theory frameworks, I hope to better understand how and why the word “female” has come to denote such disrespect while doing so in a more covert fashion than typical insults tend to do.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The power that words carry is something that I have come to view as undeniably potent. For some, a word is just a word and can be rolled off the tongue with no consequence. However, to another, perhaps the recipient of those words, the damage can be something that sticks with them for years to come. I personally remember several points in my life where someone said something to or about me that painfully affected me. In these moments they left me with the responsibility of unpacking their words and healing myself without acknowledging that they knew they were wrong. Our language is one with deep roots and complex meaning. We change, we evolve, and we take our language with us. We melt it down and reshape it as we go; words that once meant one thing now mean another. With that comes a certain genealogy, one that sometimes is difficult to pin down. However, in the action of sitting still, pulling apart the context and use of the word used, we often are able to trace it to some root of origin - whether that be the origin of the word itself, or the ideologies held in the use of that word.

My interest in this subject matter stems from the word “female.” Initial intent for this study was to create a genealogy for this word, an acknowledgement of the ways in which this word has been conceptualized and used from past to present day. To begin, I have noticed in my observations that the word “female” is often used as a term with

derogatory undertones that reflect the dominance of masculine ideology and affirmation of the patriarchal position. This is most typically the case when men are the ones addressing women as “females.” What I want to do is better understand what the term “female” means in a multifaceted way. By dissecting and putting this word into context, I hope to better understand the word and what its usage suggests about the ideologies of those who use it as a verbal weapon against women.

As mentioned, the initial objective of the research I thought would be to conduct a genealogy. The basis for the idea came from the work of Joseph Roach, and what Roach describes as a “genealogy of performance” (1992). Roach’s description of giving a genealogy of a performance includes “documenting the historical transmissions and dissemination of cultural practices and attitudes through collective representations” (Roach, 1992). Roach gathers his own understanding of this from Johnathan Arac’s definition of Nietzsche and Foucault’s methods (Roach, 1996).

A critical genealogy seeks to uncover and account for how we got here from the past in a way that is useful in us understanding alternatives to the present condition we know today (Roach, 1996). The work of Christina Sharpe, “In The Wake: On Blackness and Being” (2016), also served as the motivation to perform this research. In her first chapter, Sharpe takes the word “wake” and dissects it by looking at the different meanings of the word and engages with it to relate it to different moments of Black existence. Both Sharpe’s work and Roach’s work inspired me and were initial models for this study, but in the end my work turned out to be something different.

In the context of my work, I will be using a critical lens to deconstruct the word and its use. In this analysis the topic of performance will be brought up as well. Performance will be particularly useful in this analysis as I will be utilizing the works of Judith Butler in my exploration of gender. Their work on gender performance will help to lay the foundation to a portion of my overall argument. The term “female” lends itself to being recognized as an external view or performance. To this end, I will be incorporating the thoughts of performance theorists such as Butler on the topic as well as a breakdown of the word and its usage built from an understanding gathered through previous research and my own data collection and interpretation. Through this work, I hope to answer my research question of how the word female when used as a replacement for woman elicits a feeling of disrespect. I also hope to gain a better understanding of the ideologies held in the word and how or if they influence the ideologies held by those who use the term when conversing about women.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Saying Female

fe·male

/ˈfē,māl/

adjective

Of or denoting the sex that can bear offspring or produce eggs, distinguished biologically by the production of gametes (ova) which can be fertilized by male gametes. "a herd of female deer"

noun

A female animal or plant. "females may lay several hundred eggs in two to four weeks" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.)

Figure 1

To begin my understanding of this term, I started by looking at the definition of the word. The word “female” is primarily used as an adjective. An adjective meaning a

word that describes something, typically that something being a noun. We often use this to distinguish gender in a situation where one may not otherwise be assumed to be either a woman or girl (Cutler, 2014). For example, distinguishing someone as a female police officer would be widespread practice as the profession itself does not express the person's gender. Further, while the job title does not connote gender, it is typically assumed that a police officer is male due to the fact that the field is primarily occupied by men (Corley, 2022). When female is properly used as a noun, it is in reference to a female animal or plant. One of the issues I notice in the use of the word is the context. The ways in which it is used that elicits a sense of disrespect against women is when it is used in place of the noun "woman".

wom·an

/ˈwʊmən/

noun

An adult female human being.

(Oxford Dictionary, n.d.)

Figure 2

The word woman is a noun denoting that someone is an adult female human. It brings humanity to the way you acknowledge someone you are referring to. It differentiates us as humans from being categorized in the same way a plant or animal may be. The argument of those who use a term like “female” to refer to women may indeed be that we as humans are categorically animal, but there is still a difference. We do not associate ourselves as being on the same level as a cat or a house plant as there are fundamental differences in our being. As humans, we have the ability to connect with a higher level of understanding and power “god, reason or control” (French, 1985 as cited in Adams & Donovan, 1995). This ability we have as humans is the foundation of the patriarchy in which we operate as superior to other creations of nature (French, 1985 as cited in Adams & Donovan, 1995). That said, when a man refers to a woman as a “female” he places himself within the realm of humanity and he withdraws that humanity from the woman he is referring to. He places himself above women in the same way we view humans to be the “masters” of animals. In essence, calling a woman a “female” is quite literally dehumanizing.

Another issue we face in the use of the word “female” as a noun describing human women is the issue of othering. The term female when used as a noun treats gender as something dimorphic (Cutler, 2014). This means that there are only two distinct types of individuals within a certain species. For example, within certain species of bird, only males have bright color patterns while females have duller color patterns. In reference to human biology, this may be the case when looking at the sex assigned to someone at birth, but we are not dimorphic in gender. In using “female” as a noun, it

purports the dichotomy that there are two rigid categories for gender, and they are determined by one's genitals (Cutler, 2014). What this does not account for is the theory that gender is not in fact assigned and binary, but actually a role and a performance that one must take on.

Performing Female

Gender and its performance is something that has been widely discussed for years on end. In Gayle Rubin's essay "The Traffic in Women" (1975), she does the work of explaining the sex and gender distinction that informs my argument. Sex refers to the biological and physiological differences between male and female bodies (Rubin, 1975). This facticity is something assigned to us at birth that places us in a binary category of either male or female (there are exceptions to this as well when considering those who are born intersex). Gender on the other hand refers to the roles, behaviors, expectations, and societal norms that a particular culture may consider to be appropriate for men and women (Rubin, 1975). This poses the idea that sex and gender are not only separate, but that gender is a construct that goes beyond biological facticity.

So, what happens when you call someone a "female"? As I mentioned briefly before, it is in a sense reducing one to their genitalia. It is disrespecting the fact that they are a person with an identity that you are not acknowledging. Even if this person identifies with their sex assigned at birth, by calling them a "female" and not a woman you still are refusing to acknowledge their identity as a human being and reducing them to a set of biological factors. Nevertheless, I would like to spend some time discussing

what it actually means for one to find an identity in a gender and then engage in the performance of that gender.

Butler (1988) delves into what it is to perform one's gender. They begin by looking at one of the claims Simone de Beauvoir posits in saying that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949 as cited in Butler, 1988). Butler goes on to elaborate on this stating that this means that gender is not something that someone simply wakes up having. It is not something stable or fixed from which a portrayal comes, it is instead something that is cultivated over time through the "stylized repetition of acts" to suit one's identity (Butler, 1988).

Performing "female". I wonder, what does that even mean? In Butler's piece, they address the difference between gender and sex as I have mentioned before. They bring in the claims of Beauvoir again. "When Beauvoir claims that 'woman' is a historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity. To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" (Butler, 1988, p. 522).

This posits that there is no performing "female". Female is something that is biological and irrelevant to one's performance of self. To say one can, "perform 'female'" makes no sense. It makes no more sense than it does to say one can perform

ovum or uterus. Female, as both Butler and Beauvoir explain, is the biological facticity. It is an adjective, one that describes an attribute of a whole person. It is not a word that can capture who someone is as a person; instead it reduces them to biological facticity. The performance that people are often referring to when they are referring to themselves or others, is really the performance of “woman” rather than female. One of the terms that is commonly used in the discussion of what it is to perform as a woman is the word “femininity”.

fem·i·nin·i·ty

/ˌfeməˈninədē/

noun

1. qualities or attributes regarded as characteristic of women.

(Oxford Dictionary, n.d.)

Figure 3

Femininity is in reference to the performance we associate with womanhood. As Butler mentioned, this performance, the ritual we have come to know as femininity, is rooted in the historical idea of what it means to be a woman. That may be the wearing of skirts and dresses, the doing of one's hair in a particular manner, engaging in

conversation with a particular flair. All of these things are external performances that throughout history have come to be understood as inherently feminine acts. We have also seen these understandings challenged throughout history by successive movements of feminist liberation. We have seen moments in time as women have fought back against the idea of what it is to be a woman and perform in a certain way.

One example that comes clearly to mind is the 1968 Miss America protest. During this protest, women's liberation protesters showed up to the Miss America pageant in opposition of the beauty standards that were being pushed on women (Lee, 2014). In order to make their point emphasized, several of the protesters ended up bringing and burning their bras (as well as other items such as *Playboy* magazines) as an act of resistance to the male-dominated culture that proposed women needed to be confined to particular and rigid standards of beauty (Lee, 2014). From this particular event the idea of “bra-burning feminist” sprung to life. In reality, these women were simply challenging the idea that conforming to societal beauty and gender performance standards is a requirement for expressing femininity and womanhood.

An important thing to note in this instance is that the performance of these acts, the effective resistance to the performance denoted to mean “woman”, resulted in the othering of these women. What I mean when I say the “othering of women” is in reference to the concept of defining individuals or groups of people as fundamentally different than oneself or one’s own group (McAlister, 2006). This often involves the marginalization or dehumanization of those who are perceived as “other” (Fanon, 2008)

To this point of othering, Butler mentioned in their piece that the refusal to adhere to these social constructs often ends up resulting in the regular punishment of those who “fail to do their gender right” (Butler, 1988, p. 522). Examples of this have been prominent throughout history, especially in queer history where gender and its expression has often been challenged. We have seen people who either refuse to perform the sex they were assigned as their gender, or, while identifying with that sex as their gender, instead opt to perform in other ways. Through these expressions we have seen the birth of ballroom, drag, gender non-conforming personal expression and a myriad of other forms of personal performance.

So, we have addressed that there is no true performing female. There is the performance of femininity and there is the performance of a “woman”. We have also addressed the fact that one does not have to be assigned female at birth, nor even identify as a woman, in order to engage in performing femininity as an adult (as happens in drag performances). However, what power does it hold when you assign someone a label such as “female” based upon the assumptions you have of what gender and performance should be? Further, we have to think about what it means to answer to the label that someone assigns to you.

Power in Calling

There is power in our words. Something we say a lot but don’t often think about fully when it comes to the implications of what this really means. There is a power that comes with naming or calling something or someone. This power is not something you simply enact, but it is something that affects another and in turn warrants true thought.

Althusser, in his 1970 piece “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation)”, discusses the idea of calling someone. He points out the idea that by calling someone you are acknowledging them and in doing that you make them a subject to yourself. He gives an analogy of being on a walk and calling out “hey, you there” to a passerby. In that moment you acknowledge someone as a subject. Further, when the person turns around, they also acknowledge themselves as subject saying that they recognize themselves to have been seen and subjugated by the caller.

What all does this have to do with the word female? The way I have come to see it, is that when someone calls another a “female” and thus moves them into the position of subject, they are imposing their view of who that person is onto the person as subject (Althusser, 1970). This becomes inevitable as we engage in addressing others. The difference comes in with the intention behind the word. When you call someone into a subject position using a term that is dehumanizing, you are projecting these ideologies onto that person and perpetuating a view of women that is belittling to their humanity (Fairclough, 1989).

What then is it to answer to “female”? To answer someone is to allow and acknowledge the fact you are being subjugated to someone else. You are allowing someone to interpellate you, almost like bringing you into their story in a sense. Using the same example Althusser used, if I were to be walking along the street and someone were to call out to me by calling me a female, I am faced with an opportunity. I am already being called into subject by the person calling me, so they are going to project their views and ideologies on me either way. I however, have the opportunity to remain

facing forward, moving towards my initial goal, or I can engage in taking the 180 degree turn and fully step into the position of subject. By remaining steadfast and deciding not to acknowledge myself as the subject of the derogatory term "female", I am refusing to take on that label. In turning, I am accepting that I am the “female” I was called. I take on the ideologies this person has about me based on what they called out to get my attention.

This situation is a moment for power to be challenged. The power that our language holds allows for us to label and speak for others. While ethically speaking this is an issue, it is also an opportunity. It is an opportunity for us to speak up for ourselves in refusing to acknowledge being called outside of our identity. By refusing to make that 180 degree turn to someone calling you a “female”, you refuse to allow them the power of dehumanizing you and interpellating you within the confines of what that word means (Žižek, 2009). It is an opportunity for you to stand opposed to the ideologies of those who would strip you down to a biological facticity rather than who you are as an actual human being with an identity (hooks, 2014).

Ideology

i·de·ol·o·gy

/ˌɪdēˈäləjē, ɪdēˈäləjē/

noun

1. a system of ideas that unconsciously shapes and constrains both our beliefs and behaviors.

(Ott & Mack, 2014)

Figure 4

Why is it that someone would opt into using the term “female” as a noun to describe women? It doesn’t even sound right when you say it. I suppose there could be several factors, one of course being popularity. In many of the instances I see it used around me, I am hearing it from people who adopt the term and its context either from their peers or from the social figures that they look up to. While they may not understand the literal connotations of using the word, context of the use often points that their views align in similar ways with the ideologies of those who use the term in a demeaning way.

What exactly is an ideology? Ideology is a system of ideals or ideas. It is especially in reference to the ideas and ideals that form the basis of economic or political theory and policy. These ideologies are what help to shape the ways people view the world around them. How does this tie into the use of the word female as a way to reference women? Well, the term connotes dehumanization and allows for the power dynamic of man (human being) over animal (female = female animal or plant) (Dunayer as in Adams & Donovan, 1995). In calling someone this you are calling them into subject of the term which refers to them based on biological facticity, reducing them to their sexual organs. You are exerting your power in placing yourself in a place above the

subject of your “call” by using language that reduces women to something less than human. In my deconstruction of this, it leads me to imagine the ideologies one has about women are that they belong in a place below men. If society has progressed to a point where women have many more freedoms and liberties than they did in the past, and men are seen as “equals” (a very debatable concept) to women they must then be relegated to using language as a form of oppression.

The history and context with which I am building my argument has laid a foundation to my overarching claim that the word “female” is a term of disrespect. Through my analysis, I hope it has become clear that through definition alone, there are distinct reasons in which the term connotes ideas of sexism, dehumanization, and general disrespect. In investigating the usage and context of the word through content analysis and interviews, my goal is to further illustrate how the term has been used to convey negative associations to women and illustrate a pattern of disrespect through its usage.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA)

The primary theoretical framework that I will be employing, and to some extent have already employed in the previous sections of this paper, is Critical Discourse Analysis which I will henceforth refer to as CDA. CDA is an approach of analysis in which one takes a more ethical stance on social issues with the goal of improving society (Huckin, 1997). Throughout my career, some of the theories that have influenced my studies and critical analysis include feminist theory, queer theory, and critical race theory frameworks. Utilizing my background understanding of these theories, my CDA

application will come from a viewpoint that seeks to advocate for progress and inclusivity informed by the lenses these theories have provided to me in my own understanding of the world.

Part of the reason CDA is the framework I chose to primarily employ, is the fact that CDA seeks to combine at least three levels of analysis in its practice. Those three levels being “the text or artifacts, the discursive practice (that is, the processes of writing/speaking and reading/hearing) that create and interpret that text; and the larger social context that bears upon it” (Huckin, 1997, p. 87). By completing this level of analysis in my work I hope to understand how all of these levels are related and how they influence one’s ideologies, in particular the ones held around women. Below I will highlight some previous studies that have employed CDA in contexts that are relevant to my own work.

CDA in Relation to Gender Stereotypes

Previous work applying CDA has successfully brought to light some of the intricacies of gendered language, shining a light on the ways in which language aids in both constructing and perpetuating stereotypes. In a piece by West et.al. (1997), an analysis of media discourse on gender, the authors utilized CDA to dissect language choices. In doing so they were able to reveal some of the contributions that are made to the construction of gender-based stereotypes through the use of this language. In relation to my own study, this aligns with my application of CDA to scrutinize the derogatory connotations associated with the term “female”. By extending my own analysis to include media representations, I believe my work will build upon the foundational work of other

scholars who have utilized CDA to unveil power structures in language as well as emphasize the social implications of the language choices we make.

CDA in Relation to Ideologies

In a piece by van Dijk (2011), the author looks at the ways in which discourse can serve as a tool in unveiling the ideologies held by the user. They claimed that through looking at the discourse one uses in a critical way, you can see the way in which these ideologies are “expressed in and reproduced by discourse” (van Dijk, 2011, p. 380). In doing so, they point out that “discourse structures do not have ideological functions in isolation, only when they are controlled by the underlying ideological structures shared by a social group and within ideologically defined texts and contexts” (van Dijk, 2011, p.404).

This notion that discourses structures gain ideological function only within the context of shared underlying ideological structures and values is a fundamental part of what CDA is. Through van Dijk's (2011) perspective, it is highlighted that communicative acts analyzed through CDA derive their significance not solely from inherent linguistic features but also from their embeddedness within the socio-cultural and political frameworks of a specific social group. This underscores the importance of considering the broader context in understanding the meaning of discourse structures. In practical terms, this implies that discursive practices, such as the usage of the word “female”, has ideological functions not on their own, but in conjunction with the broader ideological structures and practices at play. This idea informs my analytical approach to

the study, recognizing the connectedness in discourse and ideology within specific media representations as well as interviews.

CULTIVATION THEORY

The other theoretical framework that I will be utilizing as I conduct my analysis is Cultivation Theory. Cultivation Theory was a theory posited by George Gerbner in the late 60's and early 70's. His work sought to understand how exposure to the media influenced the people who were consuming it (Potter, 2014). His goal was not necessarily to understand how one singular instance of media exposure influenced a person or even if it did at all, but how an amalgamation of exposures to media influenced the ways in which an individual began to think and view the world and various situations (Potter, 2014).

This theory is of use to me in this particular research because of my goal to understand how one's ideologies influence their use of terms like "female" to describe women. I suspect that the use of the term is more popularized through the intake of seeing it in the media as well as exposure to peers who use the term regularly. I believe as this paper evolves in the future to include social media context as well, the use of Cultivation Theory will become much more evident in my work in understanding the term. Until that point, I will be providing some previous literature that has employed the use of Cultivation Theory in studies that are relevant to my own.

Cultivation Theory in Relation to Gender, Media, and Identity

As established, Cultivation theory poses the idea that repeated exposure to media content over time begins to shape individuals in their perceptions and beliefs about the

world around them (Potter, 2014). Media consumption becomes a factor in gender and identity as pointed out by Gauntlett (2008). In his work, he emphasizes how media plays a role in the construction of gender identities suggesting that long-term exposure to certain gender related media content aids in cultivating specific gender related attitudes and language use (Gauntlett, 2008). In utilizing Cultivation Theory in my own work, I hope to bring light to the potential correlations between media exposure and the use of the term “female” in describing women.

Cultivation Theory in Relation to Ideology

Looking at media’s role through Cultivation Theory is important in understanding how ideologies are embedded in media and how they may influence word choices in the consumer. Berger (2013), uses an analogy of music which I find particularly appropriate considering some of the media I chose to analyze. He states that owners of the media (news outlets, magazines, book publishers, etc.) make the “tunes”. These “tunes” are distributed and stick in our minds as consumers and within these “tunes” are the political viewpoints, attitudes, ideologies, etc.. As these “tunes” get stuck in our heads, the underlying political viewpoints, attitudes, ideologies, etc. begin to permeate our own perceptions and beliefs thus changing our own ideologies (Berger, 2013, p. 151). Through utilizing Cultivation Theory as an aid to my research, I will be better able to understand how repeated exposure to certain messages in media may contribute to the adaptation of ideologies related to gender and one’s choice in language use.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGIES

For this project I am conducting a critical discourse analysis surrounding the usage of the word “female”. For this aspect I will be conducting a content analysis on several forms of media. The primary type of media I will look at will include song lyrics as well as an analysis of a book excerpt. My goal is to expand this research more thoroughly in the future including analysis of social media content.

The reasoning behind the media choices selected in this project is due in part to the wide audiences and impact these forms of media possess. Another reason I have chosen these forms of media is because these texts allow me to demonstrate the way the term has been used over time including in different formats. As to the reasoning behind each of these forms of media individually: a) the book excerpt holds significant historical and racial context that adds to the understanding of the ideologies behind this word and b) the song lyrics allowed me to translate the historical context into a modern-day usage. A close examination of song lyrics will help me analyze the underlying messages behind the terminology by looking at the wider context in which lyricists use the term.

The choices of media should be particularly useful in the analysis as the topic I am examining has been a point of discourse for several years. In my lifetime, I have observed the conversation brought up on social media platforms and used in song lyrics a multitude of times and for this reason, breaking down these forms of media will provide an opportunity to analyze the ideologies that are expressed in mainstream media.

Another point of data collection for this study will be interviews exploring people's views on the usage of the word "female" from people with different racial/ethnic backgrounds as well as a variety of sexual orientations. In future iterations of this project, I would like to include more diverse perspectives and backgrounds. This work was conducted through a critical theorist's lens. The critical lens allowed for a deeper look at what is hidden, specifically in the usage of the word "female". Through this, my goal is to motivate a self-awareness that leads to people thinking through the impact of their words and the ways in which it is received by those who they are directing their comments towards. In bringing the issues to light and providing rationale to the arguments people have had against the use of the word in particular contexts, I will be bringing awareness to the ideologies hidden behind the use of the word and the agency they have in the impact of that word. Through engaging a critical lens, I will be examining how the word is used, in particular its use as a derogatory statement especially when presented by persons with privilege, in particular, men.

SAMPLE SELECTION

Analysis involved engaging with several artifacts of media through a critical analysis lens. In finding content to analyze in this project I utilized three songs and one book. For sourcing songs, I performed a simple search for songs that contained the word "female". From that selection I located some songs from more popular artists. In the scope of this research, 'popular artists' refers to those musicians who have garnered widespread recognition and substantial public attention. I chose these artists as they are most likely to have had an impact due to the singer's popularity. After selecting the

songs, I both listened to the audio via online streaming services and reviewed the lyrics using platforms such as Genius and Lyrics.com. When looking for a historical example from print publishing, I came across an article reflecting a PBS (Public Broadcast Service) piece that cited work Thomas Jefferson did regarding the state of Virginia. In this book there was a section that addressed his views of Black people and included the term female. I chose this excerpt due to the historical context of the book, as well as the implications of Jefferson's views of race and gender.

For the interview portion of this project, I was able to capture five interviews. For future iterations I would of course prefer to have a larger sample including a diverse but purposeful population. The study was anonymized using pseudonyms and only include generalized information about the participants so as to protect their individual privacy. My target demographic was young adults between the ages of 18 and 25. This population was chosen purposefully as individuals within this age range represent a crucial developmental stage in which individuals are actively shaping their identities and perspectives on the world around them (Arnett, 2000). I believe getting their perspective will help me to understand some of the reasoning behind its usage and whether it is aligned more with ideology, the simple usage of popular vernacular, or some combination of the two.

However, I am also open and interested in getting the perspective of older individuals as well. By including their perspectives, it may allow for any similarities or differences in the usage of the word based on generations to be explored. It may also allow a glimpse into the ideologies of older generations as compared to younger. I do not

want to be overly narrow with my sample selection as I feel that gathering perspectives from a wide variety of people will allow me to understand how intersectionality may play a role in one's ideologies regarding their experiences with the term and what it means to "be female".

ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

I will be conducting interviews via Zoom and transcribing the interview data using the transcription option Zoom provides as well as a personal read of the transcript to confirm accuracy for later analysis. The interviews will be guided by an interview guide (Appendix A). The analysis of the interviews and media artifacts will both be analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) and cultivation theory. My critical analysis will employ the use of feminist theory, queer theory, and critical race theory frameworks. These lenses have been instrumental to me over the course of my studies in developing my own ways of deconstructing concepts such as power, privilege, and ideologies. Through using these critical lenses to pick apart this data, I hope to better understand the ideologies that may be held behind the use of the word "females" to describe women.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONTENT ANALYSIS

I have done a good bit of work here in the literature review breaking down the word female. I have pointed out the problems I see in its usage and the problems in the ideologies of those who use the term. However, I have not yet given much to dissecting the word in context to real life applications. In my data analysis, I will insert several real examples in which the term “female” is used to describe women, and I will break down the implications of the term in its context.

BOOK

In 1781, Thomas Jefferson wrote a book called *Notes on the State of Virginia*. This book entails a lot of observations about the physical aspects of the state, although there was a section of the book devoted to his observations and prejudices about the intelligence, character, and physical characteristics of Black people (PBS, n.d.). In one section in his observation, he states “They are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation” (Jefferson, 1781). In the context of this entire section of his book he is dissecting the intelligence, character, and physical attributes of Black people as compared to that of white people. He makes it very clear in his observations that he views Black people as a whole to be primitive, especially in their intimate relationships. He infers that Black women are hyper-sexual and that they do not have many morals when it comes to choosing sexual partners (Holmes, 2016). In his depiction of Black women having

unlimited and indiscriminating sexual capacity, he paved the way for rape culture within American slavery by viewing Black “females” as sexual commodities rather than human beings (Holmes, 2016). This use of the word reduces women not only to a sexual object, but his views of Black people as a whole add to the dehumanization that comes with the use of the word female.

SONG LYRICS

Another instance in which the word “female” is used is in song lyrics. I selected three songs in which the word “female” was used recurrently. These songs were chosen because their lyrics allowed me to translate the historical context into a modern-day usage. A close examination of song lyrics will be useful in my analyzation of the underlying messages behind the terminology by looking at the wider context in which lyricists use the term.

In searching for the use of the word in song lyrics, I noticed a particular pattern that aligned with the thoughts I’ve had throughout this paper. When this term is used it is being used to describe a woman with “low morals”. Again, this use of the term reduces a woman to genitalia and connotes sexual immorality. I noticed this trend in music from both men and women. In the instances of men using it, it seems to connote the viewing of women as sexual objects, devaluing them so that they feel they have a superior societal position thus using the term to indicate this. Below I will include examples:

Attractive Female Wanted Lyrics

[Verse 1]

I'm tired of buying Penthouse and Oui and Hustler
It's Friday night I'm all alone, still a bachelor
She said she'd call me when she'd finished work
Haven't heard a word all day

[Verse 2]

I may not be Warren Beatty or Mohammed Ali
(Attractive female wanted)
I ain't asking a great deal, just a female to move in with me
(Attractive female wanted)
I'll share all my records, toothbrush and car
And color TV, honestly
A single girl for my single bed is my remedy
(Attractive female wanted)

Figure 5

This first example is from Rod Stewart's *Attractive Female Wanted*. The song is about a single man who is looking for a woman to come into his life and make his life better. I have included the first and second verse above, but I recommend looking up the full lyrics in order to get a better picture of what he is looking for in a "partner". In coding the lyrics, he is searching for a woman who can take care of him in every aspect. Throughout the song he talks about how he needs a woman to come in and fix his life and share his bed, but when it comes to what he has to offer (outside of a lot of strife) the list is slim (his toothbrush, his records, his car, and his color tv). The song also opens and concludes with references to the objectification of women. He opens talking about his tiresome affairs with pornography magazines and concludes by saying he's close to

writing a letter to Hugh Hefner asking him to send one of the girls on the playboy ranch to be with him.

Another interesting use of the word “female” by men in music is in the song, *Get Low* by Lil Jon. As most know, the song is about being in a club and objectifying women. The song is riddled with particularly explicit language that regularly is in use to sexualize women and reduce them to an object of affection. However, the thing I find most interesting is the comparison between the clean and explicit versions of this song. In the explicit version, the word “bitches” is used to refer to these women i.e. “till all these bitches crawl”. However, in the clean version, this word is substituted for females. This is particularly intriguing when you think about the connotations the word “bitch” has, especially when used by men who are clearly objectifying women. So, why is it that “female” is the word they chose to replace it with? Unless their ideologies indicate to them that the word “female” is on par with a derogatory term such as “bitch”, yet “female” remains an acceptable substitute to negatively refer to women. Below, I will include the comparison of the choruses. However again, I encourage you to look up the full lyrics in order to get a more comprehensive look at what the song is all about.

Explicit	Clean
Get Low Lyrics	
[Chorus: Big Sam]	[Chorus: Ying Yang]
3-6-9, damn, you fine	[Screech]
Hoping she can sock it to me one more time	3, 6, 9 damn damn fine
Get low	Move and sing it to me one mo time
Get low (Get low)	Get low, Get low 6x
Get low (Get low)	To the window (to da window)
Get low (Get low)	To the wall (to da wall)
To the window (To the window)	To the sweat right down and fall (fall)
To the wall (To the wall)	To where all these females crawl (crawl)
Till the sweat drop down my balls (My balls)	To all skeet, skeet, skeet, skeet skeet skeet
Till all these bitches crawl (Crawl)	All skeet skeet, got, I got what?
Till all skeet-skeet, motherfucker (Motherfucker)	To all skeet skeet skeet skeet skeet skeet
Till all skeet-skeet, goddamn (Goddamn)	All skeet skeet, got, I got what?
Till all skeet-skeet, motherfucker (Motherfucker)	
Till all skeet-skeet, goddamn (Goddamn)	

Figure 6

Another example of the use of the word “female” in song lyrics is in *Nasty Girl* by Destiny’s Child. The previous examples have all been by male artists who have used the term in their lyrics. This is a group of women who are singing this song. In the song they are talking about a woman who they view as sexually promiscuous. They feel that the way she lives her life makes it harder for them to find male partners, because they don’t want to be as revealing or promiscuous as the women they are referring to. This is interesting because the song seems to contradict itself. In the song they talk about how men don’t want “... no hot female. That’s been around the block, female, you nasty girl”. However, later in the song they also talk about how these women that men supposedly don’t want, “make it hard for girls like [themselves]” to find men. This implies to me that

the women singing the song view themselves as more virtuous than the women they are singing about. However, it really seems they may be feeling jealous of the kinds of attention given to the women they are singing about. In order to resolve the dissonance they feel due to their “moral superiority”, they engage in bullying the women they view to be below them by calling them females and making them out to just be sexual objects without real value.

Nasty Girl Lyrics

[Intro: Beyoncé]

You's a nasty (Nasty), trashy (Nasty)

Sleazy (Nasty), classless (Nasty)

[Chorus: Beyoncé]

Nasty, put some clothes on

I told ya

Don't walk out your house without your clothes on

I told ya

Girl, what ya thinkin' 'bout lookin' that to' down?

I told ya

These men don't want no hot female

That's been around the block, female, you nasty girl

Nasty, put some clothes on

I told ya

Don't walk out your house without your clothes on

I told ya

Girl, what ya thinkin' 'bout lookin' that to' down?

I told ya

These men don't want no hot female

That's been around the block, female, you nasty girl

Figure 7

INTERVIEWS

For this project I managed to conduct a total of five interviews for my thesis. In the future, as I build this project out further, I would like to include more but with the

time constraints I had for this project I was still able to capture a lot of good information. The participants I was able to interview for this version of the project included three women and two men, all in their twenties. These participants were all selected based on their willingness to participate as well as their meeting the age requirement and demographic I set for this study. By interviewing these participants within this age range my goal was to get the perspectives of individuals who are actively in the process of shaping their own identities and views of the world (Arnett, 2000). For the purpose of protecting their privacy I have assigned them all pseudonyms which are what you will see me referring to them by. The three women will be Yvonne, Mae and Rachel. The young men will be referred to as David and Issac. All interviews were conducted over Zoom and recorded with participant's consent for transcription and analysis.

As I take you through some of the highlights of these interviews, I will be sharing my question followed by their answers and then my analysis of those responses. This will be followed by a discussion and conclusion section in which I will address some of the directions I would like to take this research in the future and close out the paper.

One of the first questions I asked my participants was what it means to “be female”. While this question may seem straightforward, the answer is not quite that simple.

Rachel: We have an extreme power, and when I say we are powerful, I don't say that in a way where we are above other people, but we have. We are capable of doing things that some men cannot do. We can bring children into this world. We are built to be able to do

that. we are more in touch with our emotions. We bring and add more light to this world.

In my honest opinion...

Just knowing that I'm a woman makes me feel as if, like I have beauty to bring to the world. even though we have a lot of like harsh stipulations on what the word like beautiful means. I feel like we're breaking barriers on that we're really showing that you don't we don't have to have men dictate the way beauty is seen. Beautiful is all shapes and sizes, eye, colors, skin, color and everything, everything in between, everything that you see and every way that a person acts. I just see pure beauty within other women and within myself.

David: Nothing necessarily, I mean woman, do all kinds of things, you know. You can't put women in a box, you know.

Yvonne: I guess it means whatever you identify it as.

Issac: Well, when I hear the term female, I just think of a woman. Just someone that's born, and as a female, someone that has ovaries and all that stuff.

What I noticed in these answers were that while searching for words to give an answer to what it means to “be female” all of my participants were somewhat stumped at first. There was a lot of thinking going on in regard to these answers. When they came up with these answers, the common theme was there was no correct answer. To be female does not look the same on all people. To be female does not define someone and box them into categories. In Rachel’s response, I noticed themes of boundary breaking. While describing what her ideas of womanhood and femininity are, she also took time to point out there are no absolutes in “being female”. David and Yvonne did the same thing in

their answers, although a bit more to the point, their responses indicated to me that there was no right way of “being female”. Issac was an outlier in my group, his response was more biologically based which I think when looking at the definition of the word is correct. However, in his correctness he also includes the use of the word woman indicating a sameness between biological facticity and identity. A somewhat problematic assumption in and of itself as we have previously discussed the reductive harm that is done in the addressing of one as female rather than woman. These responses are interesting when you challenge the initial understandings participants have of the word with its use and the connotations behind it.

In order to do this I next asked “have you ever seen the word females being used as a replacement for the word women?”. All of my participant’s had similar answers, they had certainly seen it in online platforms, and some had heard it in person.

Rachel: I've just seen it used so many times. I've seen it. Be used by men who are in relationships, and they are talking about other women that do not include who they are with. I've seen it with single men. Seen them just use it as a way to associate women because another woman has hurt them, so they think that they can call other women females in a derogatory way, because they feel like all these other women will hurt them. They're all the same, they're cheaters, their liars, psychopaths. When somebody switches the word woman for female, I feel like that person does not have respect for the individual that they're speaking on. It also takes me back in time to when women have been extremely mistreated, and they're still being mistreated to this day and, like I said, it puts you in a category. So, for example. One of my coworkers, his name is Jack. And

when he's not talking about his fiancé he will say, well, all these other females they want to be, they want to be messy, they have drama, they come with too much baggage, and every time he utters the word before he even utters the word female, I know he's about to say it. I just know he's about to finish with something that is degrading because when you start off with that, and you don't call them a woman. I just know right off the bat, because that's where it's deriving from now. It's not about a clinical professional helping you out on doctor's forms or something...It's simply somebody putting themselves on a pedestal and lowering us and saying, we're not good enough, or you don't respect us. But it's funny, because any and at any point, if any man is around me. and they start using the word female. I'm like auto-correct. I will literally say women over top of them as soon as I know that it's coming, because, like I said, it has gotten to a point where you can use context clues around the word that you know it's coming up. You know what's about to be used because they're saying something disrespectful, and they're talking about a woman. But I've gotten to a point where I have auto corrected two of my co-workers that are men. I've already corrected them so much that they no longer say females. They say women. And I'm like good, as you should, because we're not disrespecting them to the point where we're just calling them males because I feel like It's just. I don't know it's so weird that they do that.

Me: As a follow up to that, after you correct them. So now they say, women, do. Do you notice a change in the things that follow? So instead of saying, all these females talk like this so blah blah blah! Do they still follow it up with saying, like all these women talk like this, are they still continuing on with disrespectful comments?

Rachel: So, it's funny, because when I correct them, they stop. I think they have to.

There's like a pause so it's almost as if, when they are thinking back to changing the word to women that one, they're either starting to think about other women in their lives that are important to them or two, they're starting to think of the fact that, damn I really just belittled them to the point where I can't even refer to them as women. I see that realization. Do they still follow it up? Yes, but it's not, it doesn't come out as harsh. They don't go on a whole long Ted talk about it, it's more of a shortened version and if anything, also like, for example, my co-worker. My other co-worker, not Jack, Al. Al would say, yeah, some of these females like he's not even trying to be disrespectful with what he's saying he'll just call them a female because it's become a norm for men, and I started correcting him. and this man no longer says females. He was trying to be smart with me and say, oh, these beautiful women! I'm so sorry like that's what he said, and he started correcting himself. Now he doesn't even call he doesn't call women females. He doesn't call them just women. He says these beautiful women before he says something, and now because he started saying that, the stuff he's following it up with is not even bad. And it also has lowered the harshness of what he's saying, and he's being more respectful. It's making him sit there and think. It's degrading, because when he's sitting there thinking about a beautiful woman. He's thinking about his mom, his sister, his cousins. He's sitting there thinking about his potential wife. He's thinking about every girl he ever hit on that he had a crush on. Would he ever go up to them and speak that on them? No.

David: Yes, I have. I've heard that before. It's like a common thing nowadays is more like in my mind, it is, it's like slang. you know it isn't, at least not in my mind, it doesn't

seem derogatory, like, you know like it's not like the word bitches or hoes, like, you know, it doesn't seem like the intent is to bring someone down like those words. Now I don't personally use it because I know it could be perceived that way. Okay. I have heard it is a replacement for the word women. Like, oh these females, you know, like...

Me: Almost like an in between of using like bitch or hoe or something and calling people women.

David: Yeah. that's a good way of putting it.

Me: What do you feel? The connotation behind the use of the word female, especially in that context.

David: It's usually in the same context. So, like you know how, men are like women, you know, they do this this and this or women be like men, you know they just. It's usually this like frustration, but out of love, not necessarily like, you know. coming from a negative place.

Me: What are your perceptions of people who use that word to call women female

David: I'm trying to...I'm trying to think of people who use it. You know...I don't have any necessarily perceptions of them like they don't fit into one box to me, but they usually like a lot of times. Oh, is there going to be girls with the party stuff like that, you know.

Me: So usually, guys that may be considered players or something?

David: Sometimes. Actually, yeah.

My interviews with Mae, Yvonne and Issac also brought up interesting points that echoed the sentiments in the reflections David and Rachel made. They made points of the

disrespect, Issac zeroing in on the fact he sees it often in use by older generations and by those who have had negative experiences with women. Mae pointed out she often sees its use within the Black community in particular by “toxic” men and women who use the term to assert dominance in the “alpha male” role or if not in the role itself, an assertion of the patriarchal values asserted onto women by men in these roles. Yvonne said something similar to the “alpha male” comment Mae made indicating she often sees its use in “a lot of podcasts, specifically like talking like in the manosphere realm talking about that. And I definitely don't like that, because I think at that point it's just like a misogynistic term that you're using” These responses echoed the themes I noticed in the excerpts included above from Rachel and David as well. One of the central themes being a sense of hurt and disrespect.

Both responses indicated towards a place of frustration or hurt as a stemming point for these uses of the word female. Rachel pointed out that her co-workers most likely use the word to refer to women they view as potential threats. Not necessarily violent threats, but a threat to their peace. I will even go a step further and say they may be threats to their masculinity. The idea that a woman may threaten that leads them to the use of the word female to reaffirm their place as a man who has authority over women. Like I mentioned earlier in the paper, the word female is literally a dehumanization of women, so in its use, they place themselves on a higher pedestal. However, when you think critically through this, it boils down to a defense mechanism for hurt. David echoed this in his responses too. He stated that he saw this often coming from places of

frustration but love. Perhaps having a wounded pride may lead to the use of this word, but it doesn't mean there is no desire for a woman as a partner.

This leads me to the next thing I noticed in these interviews. Rachel pointed out that in her co-worker's vocabulary the word women was reserved for women he respected and had a connection with. He always referred to his fiancé as a woman while referring to other women as females. This indicates to me that there is a level of respect that comes with being called a woman that being called a female does not garner. This was further echoed in this interview as she went on to describe how when she corrected her co-workers and they began calling women "beautiful women" or women instead of females, the words that followed began to be less harsh. They had to make a conscious decision to follow up the word women with negative words and risk associating those negative things with the women in their lives they respected and would never call females, or they could follow it up with words that were spoken more kindly and spare themselves the cognitive dissonance that would follow if they ruined their perceptions of women.

This is also interesting when you compare this to what David said about the types of men he typically sees calling women females. He said that in general the type of man he encounters using this word could be considered a player. This takes me back to the analysis I did on Rod Stewart's *Attractive Female Wanted*. The song, like the idea of a "player", lends one to think about the type of man who views women as sexual objects. While David's analysis of these men lent itself to viewing those who use this word as frustrated, it again makes me wonder why they are frustrated? If they are the "player"

type are they frustrated because of rejection? Or does the word female simply allow them to dehumanize women just enough so that when they engage in rhetoric and behavior that views women as sexual objects instead of human beings, do they no longer feel the dissonance of thinking of the women they respect in that context.

The idea of disassociating the term from one's identity is also an interesting aspect to consider in this sense as the power asserted in being "called" something does affect you in some way. One of the last questions I asked my participants was what would they feel and think if they were to be called a "female" by someone? What would they read between the lines in that situation? For Issac, he pointed out that it would feel disrespectful, I asked if it would be worse if they called him a bitch and he responded that in a sense it would be worse "because of the facts that it's like they're trying to get away with saying it in a way where it doesn't sound like they're saying it. Right? They're basically calling you a bitch at that point, you know, they're just being kind of sneaky about it."

The covert disrespect is the issue I find in almost every instance of the word's use. It's a way to assert dominance and echo sentiments of patriarchy. It is disrespectful in itself to refer to women as female. It's reductive in its nature, something Mae echoes in her response to the question "(I would say) Don't call me female. call me by my name first off. I feel like when you're calling me a female like that. You're not even addressing me as who I am. As Mae. You're categorizing me. That's how I would feel if somebody were to call me a female. You're categorizing me. You're viewing me as something other than myself."

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Through engaging in CDA throughout my work, it has afforded me a more nuanced understanding of the layers inherent in language usage concerning the word “female”. Drawing from the insights of van Dijk combined with those of Butler and Beauvoir, utilizing CDA allowed for me to delve into the ideological values woven into the discourse of the interviews as well as the context of the media analyzed. Understanding the fact that there are socio-cultural and political frameworks embedded in our use of language, whether that be in media or through the interviews conducted, highlights the fact that the use of the word “female” is more than just using a word. It serves as a way of shaping perceptions and reinforcing societal ideologies.

I found that Butler’s concepts of performativity and Beauvoir’s existential perspectives helped me to enrich my understanding of the significance in using “female” instead of “woman”. These frameworks brought to light the objectifying dimensions of language and demonstrated how word choices can contribute to the dehumanization and stereotyping of women.

Further, the inclusion of Cultivation Theory also served as instrumental in understanding the gravity in the repetitive use of the word “female” in media. Within my own study, Cultivation Theory implies that the presence of “female” in the media in reference to women not only contributes to its normalization and acceptance, it also influences the perceptions and language choices of individuals consuming that media.

This establishes a link between the media analysis section of my work and the interviews conducted, suggesting that media exposure may play a role in shaping participants' perspectives on the usage of the word "female" when referring to women.

In summary, the combined usage of CDA, Cultivation Theory, and the theoretical understanding of sex and gender, provided me with a robust framework with which to analyze and interpret my data. It allowed me to uncover the subtle nuances and underlying ideologies associated with the use of the word "female" thus establishing connections between media representations and individual perspectives revealed in the interviews.

Regarding future research, I would like to add to and reword parts of my interview guide. I want to include questions that garner a more robust conversation from my participants. One thing I noticed was that they sometimes had trouble understanding what I meant in the way I posed my questions. I also would like to include in the media analysis section, content from social media. In my interviews I noted several mentions of the usage of the word on social media platforms and how it has popularized the term especially in and around younger generations which is where the application of cultivation theory truly plays a larger role. Further, a lot of the discourse I have personally seen on the subject is located on online platforms.

In future research I would like to take a selection of online posts and look not only at the context of the word's use, but also how others are responding to the use of the word in the comments and replies. As I conducted my interviews, I noticed that amongst my interviewees a lot of them had similar understandings of the work I was doing. In their

responses they all mentioned the negative connotations that came with the word, especially surrounding the user and context. However, I noticed that they, like many others, did not have an exact way to pinpoint the problem in the usage of this word. I think to further this part of the research and understanding I would also like to include more research that looks at the evolution of words. How at one point in time it may mean one thing, but we assign it different meanings over time. I feel this word is in its in-between stages of that co-opting process and living through it is resulting in what I saw in most of my participants, where unless they are deeply looking into the phenomenon, the word and these connotations held behind its usage are vague.

CONCLUSION

Through these interviews and the media analysis I have done, I have found recurring themes of dehumanization in the use of the word female. The word female and its use is something that is both complicated and not. The word itself is just a word, but the complexity comes in when we look at the power that is given to that word in the context it is used. The adaptation of seemingly innocent words into something with a lot of underlying issues is a clever facet of language. We have the ability to twist things around and make them mean completely different things than their original meaning. However, with that power we have a responsibility to think critically about the ways we allow language to be used. While the term “female” may not be as explicitly offensive as some other words, the root of it and the context in which it is used often is. It leads us to something that can be peeled back in order to reveal an ideology that views women as sexual objects or less than human. That is where the problem lies.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Interviewee Information

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
4. What is your gender identity?
5. What is your sexual orientation?

(more background questions)

Questions About the Use of “Female”

1. When you hear the word female what do you associate the term with? What does it mean to “be female”
2. Have you ever seen the word female being used to talk about women as a replacement for the word woman? I.e., “When a female tells you this you need to...” If so, please share an example.
3. What are the connotations behind the word female? Do you think there are ideological values being held behind the use of that term?
4. What are your perceptions of the people who use that word to call women female

5. If you were to be called a “female” in the context we have discussed, how would you take it? What would that do to your sense of self?

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