



**Swearing at Work: The Mixed Outcomes of Profanity**

Journal:	<i>Journal of Managerial Psychology</i>
Manuscript ID	JMP-04-2016-0102.R2
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Cross-cultural management, Human resource management, qualitative research

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## Swearing at Work: The Mixed Outcomes of Profanity

### Abstract

**Purpose:** We explore the use and misuse of swearing in the workplace.

**Design:** Using a qualitative methodology, we interviewed 52 lawyers, medical doctors and business executives in the UK, France, and the U.S.

**Findings:** In contrast to much of the incivility and social norms literatures, we find that male and female business executives, lawyers and doctors of all ages admit to swearing. Further, swearing can lead to positive outcomes at the individual, interpersonal and group levels, including stress-relief, communication-enrichment, and socialization-enhancement.

**Implications:** An implication for future scholarship is that 'thinking out of the box' when exploring emotion related issues can lead to new insights. Practical implications include reconsidering and tolerating incivility under certain conditions.

**Originality:** We identified a case in which a negative phenomenon reveals counter-intuitive yet insightful results.

Keywords: workplace-misbehavior; incivility; profanity, swearing, counter-intuitive

1  
2 The workplace incivility literature (e.g. Pearson *et al.*, 2000) has explored how uncivil  
3 behaviors at work may hinder professionalism and performance (e.g. Hadley, 2014; Priesemuth  
4 *et al.*, 2013; Sears and Humiston, 2015; van Kleef, 2014), or even lead to bullying (Soylu and  
5 Sheehy-Skeffington, 2015), aggression (Hershcovis and Reich, 2013; Shao *et al.*, 2011), and  
6 exclusion (Scott *et al.*, 2014). While these findings make sense, the current literature discusses  
7 workplace misbehavior in a simplistic manner (Vardi and Weitz, 2004), mostly exploring  
8 negative outcomes.  
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10  
11 Similarly, the emotional-labor literature (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 2005; Gibson and Callister,  
12 2010; Gray *et al.*, 2011; Kennedy-Moore and Watson, 2001; Lindebaum and Fielden, 2011)  
13 indicates that positive emotions are acceptable at work (Lively, 2000), negative emotions should  
14 be suppressed (Kramer and Hess, 2002). A more intriguing approach would be to explore the  
15 potentially positive aspects of such behaviors. Indeed, early work regarding coping with work  
16 stress revealed that emotional release in the form of an immediate cathartic expression of  
17 feelings, such as losing temper, was quite effective (Dewe and Guest, 1990). More recently, a  
18 growing body of research has studied the potential asymmetrical effects of emotion-sharing in  
19 the workplace (e.g. Gibson and Callister, 2010; Gray *et al.*, 2011; Kennedy-Moore and Watson,  
20 2001; Lindebaum and Fielden, 2011). For example, Brown *et al.* (2005) conceptualized how  
21 stressful work events can lead to adverse emotional reactions as a coping response to regain  
22 emotional equanimity. However, more studies are required to explore how negative emotional  
23 displays by workers may not always be 'bad' (Hadley, 2014; Schilpzand *et al.*, 2016). Given the  
24 evidence that negative behavior can lead to positive outcomes there is a need to explore whether  
25 negative emotional expression might produce positive outcomes.  
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29 We address these gaps in the research by focusing on the use of language in the workplace,  
30 particularly swearing, in three different contexts (U.S., UK and France). We focus on the highly  
31 educated segment of the population employed in reputable occupations – lawyers, medical  
32 doctors, business executives – that convey social norms incompatible with incivility (Andersen,  
33 2009; Miller, 2000; Johnson and Lewis, 2010; Lim and Lee, 2011; Sliter *et al.*, 2012). We  
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2 explore the magnitude of the swearing phenomenon in the workplace to understand its meaning  
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4 for individuals and explore its outcomes.

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6 This research contributes to the professional/workplace (in)civility literature, the literature  
7  
8 on social norms for professionals, and the literature on emotions at work by challenging the  
9  
10 traditional view that social norms always preclude workplace incivility and that it is always  
11  
12 negative. In addition, this research advances the field of workplace communication and the use,  
13  
14 misuse and abuse of language in the workplace by showing how profanity is enacted and what its  
15  
16 benefits might be. On a practical note, we offer business leaders insights into enabling  
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18 communication and expression of emotion in a way that fits with contemporary language.  
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### 22 23 24 **Swearing as Workplace Incivility**

25  
26 We ground our research within the professional/workplace (in)civility literature.  
27  
28 Workplace incivility has been defined as low intensity antisocial behavior, or rude, insensitive or  
29  
30 disrespectful behavior towards others (Pearson *et al.*, 2001). Although incivility is mild in  
31  
32 intensity, it can build up to more intense behaviors like violence (Johnson and Indvik, 2001).  
33  
34 Work incivility can have dire consequences, such as decrease employee commitment,  
35  
36 productivity, performance, job satisfaction and loyalty (Welbourne *et al.*, 2016).  
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40  
41 Swearing has rarely been investigated in the management literature, either psychologically  
42  
43 or neurologically (see respectively Rassin and van der Heijden, 2005; Van Lancker and  
44  
45 Cummings, 1999), although some work has been done on swearing as a social phenomenon  
46  
47 (Baruch and Jenkins, 2007). Swearing is a form of workplace incivility because it violates the  
48  
49 “respect” criterion of fairness in interpersonal treatment (Penney and Spector, 2005).  
50

51  
52 There is no common and acceptable definition for the term “swearing”. Scholars use  
53  
54 “offensive language,” “cursing” and “dirty words” interchangeably (Kaye and Sapolsky, 2009).  
55  
56 Swearing can also be the use of taboo words (Rassin and Muris, 2005). Swearing is also related  
57  
58 to forms of verbal aggression such as loud noises, angry shouting, personal insults, cursing, foul  
59  
60 language, and threats; although it does not always have an aggressive intent (Stone *et al.*, 2010).

1  
2 Swearing can also be categorized (e.g. Montagu, 2001) into *social swearing* (occurring in  
3 interpersonal relationships with the purpose of creating or developing in-group solidarity) and  
4 *annoyance swearing* (mechanisms for relieving stress and tension in everyday life).  
5  
6 Alternatively, cursing can include emotionally powerful offensive words (Jay, 2000) (e.g. *the*  
7 *infamous Four-letter word f\*\*\* or s\*\*\**), or emotionally harmful expressions understood as  
8 insults (e.g. *kiss my ass, piss off, up yours*).  
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### 17 **Causes of swearing**

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19 The most prominent reason for swearing is to express negative emotions, particularly anger  
20 and frustration (Jay and Janschewitz, 2008). Swearing may also be a response to physical pain  
21 (Stephens and Umland, 2011). Other reasons for swearing include gaining attention, developing  
22 an interpersonal connection, showing familiarity, or increasing intimacy, belonging and  
23 informality (Young, 2004). In the workplace, swearing was observed as a way of reflecting  
24 solidarity and group cohesion (social aspects) and of releasing stress (psychological aspects)  
25 (Baruch and Jenkins, 2007) under challenging contemporary ‘dark’ careers (Baruch and Vardi,  
26 2016). In addition, managers were found to deliberately express anger through swearing in order  
27 to influence subordinates (Lindebaum and Fielden, 2011).  
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40 Emotional-labor research discusses how frustrating events may lead to swearing because  
41 “emotions not only make us feel something, they make us feel like doing something” (Gross,  
42 1999; p. 528). Evidence has indicated emotions create an ‘action response’ in an attempt to  
43 regulate and maintain states of emotional equilibrium (Hadley, 2014). The specific emotion  
44 regulation activities depend on individual factors such as emotional intelligence, personality,  
45 gender, and cultural context (Coupland *et al.*, 2008). The logical target of emotional reactions at  
46 work are coworkers due to their physical and relational proximity, their shared experiences and  
47 knowledge, and their ability to provide both instrumental and emotional forms of support  
48 (Hadley, 2014). Although this emotion regulation through coworker interactions has benefits for  
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2 the individual, it does not come without risk particularly because workplaces are governed by  
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4 rules regarding the appropriateness of emotional expression (Diefendorff and Greguras, 2009).

### 6 **Swearing and the cultural context**

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8  
9 Swearing that might be a habitual part of an individual's language in a certain context may  
10  
11 be misinterpreted as aggressive speech in another context (White, 2002). In addition, what  
12  
13 qualifies as swearwords differ (Stone and Francis, 2010) because cultural values influence the  
14  
15 semantics of offence in four domains: religion, taboo, disgust, and the laws (Jay, 2010). Hence,  
16  
17 studying cultural differences can produce explanations as to how swearwords are used in  
18  
19 different cultures.  
20

### 21 **Method**

#### 22 *Study design and sample*

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25  
26 Incivility research has been typically used a positivist approach (e.g., Scott *et al.*, 2014).  
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28 However, the interpretivist approach is most suited for understanding human actions, motives,  
29  
30 feelings, experiences, and sensemaking (Lucas, 2015). We employed semi-structured  
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32 interviewing and focused on three groups of highly qualified professionals – lawyers, medical  
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34 doctors and business executives, because they are not typically considered to be prone to the use  
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36 of expletive language and are expected to refrain from swearing. In selecting interviewees, we  
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38 relied on the widely used “key-informant interviews” approach (Gilchrest, 1992) which is not  
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40 directed at testing hypotheses, but rather at unveiling the state of the art and discovering a sense  
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42 of reality shared by the population.  
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47 Interviews were conducted by the authors and students they had trained in their country  
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49 of residence (UK, France and the U.S.). We engaged 21 British, 21 French and 10 American  
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51 professionals; 22 executives, 14 lawyers, 15 medical doctors, 1 army colonel. The sample  
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53 comprised of 32 men and 20 women, ages ranging from 20s to 60s. We stopped recruiting  
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55 interviewees when the data analysis showed we had reached saturation. Table 1 presents the  
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57 sample.  
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Insert Table 1 about here

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Interviewees were asked to provide a narrative account of their experience relating to swearing in organizations. We aimed to hear their “story” (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991). Discussing a sensitive and taboo topic, we took steps to break-the-ice and establish trust. We began with a general question on what their job involved, and then introduced the topic of swearing by recalling well-known recent examples of political leaders using swear words. We then asked whether the interviewee swore at all, at which frequency, in which circumstances, with whom and through which media (face-to-face, phone, email), and which words s/he was using. We inquired about why the interviewee thought it was appropriate, or not, to swear at work, and about their perceived benefits/drawbacks. To alleviate the sensitivity of the topic and to mitigate the risk for social desirability, we asked the same questions regarding others at work. We also gathered demographics and asked whether the interviewee was aware of a company policy around swearing.

In conducting the interviews we were mindful of the intricacies of language utilization (Welch and Piekkari, 2006), and our interviewers were fully conversant in the interviewees’ native tongue (English or French). The interview guideline was translated to French using the Brislin (1970) back-translation procedure. The interviews lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. Most of the interviews were tape recorded (with permission) and fully transcribed.

#### *Data analysis*

To analyze the interviews, we used a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), offering an alternative to the dominant deductive approach of theory generation (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008). We approached grounded theory from a relativist ontology perspective, which is an approach accepting that reality cannot be fully understood or reconstructed by a researcher since there is no single ‘reality’ to explore (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). To address issues of interpretation resulting from the diversity of the authors’ frameworks for making sense of reality

(Sandberg, 2005), we fostered reflexivity (Finlay and Gough, 2003) within our research team. We did this by jointly discussing our research questions, the interview questions and protocols to be followed for data collection. When we reached the coding stage, all authors independently engaged in the coding process to ensure inter-rater reliability (Morse, 1997). Moreover, after the first round of coding, the research team discussed data collected in order for all to take into account comments from others in subsequent rounds of analysis.

We (a) analyzed the nature of swearing (words used, frequency, whether it happened when respondents were alone or with co-workers or supervisors) (b) generated codes for reasons for swearing and (c) generated codes for positive and negative outcomes of swearing. We undertook an iterative process (Corbin and Strauss, 2015), to analyze patterns across our sample and within subcategories of our sample. The analysis then moved from a description to interpretation, where we focused on patterns, their meanings and implications in relation to existing literature. Table 2 presents the key themes and associated open codes derived during the data analysis process.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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## Findings

### *Swearing occurrence, occupational and gender differences*

Almost all interviewees across all countries admitted to swearing. Amongst the most cited incidents triggering swearing were everyday stressors, such as making a mistake, frustrating meetings, and pressure of a nearing deadline. These stressors caused an emotional release in the form of an immediate expression of feelings through swear words:

*“It’s more for anger, more for agony, if I am running late, or if someone is definitely upsetting me or if I am having a bad day and someone is constantly on my nerves”*

(Business executive, Female, UK)



1  
2 Our analysis revealed important occupational differences: while business executives  
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4 tended to swear the most in all three countries, swearing was considered unacceptable in the case  
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6 of interviewees who held leadership positions where they felt they were expected to lead by  
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8 example. For instance, a French female doctor explained that a calm and reassuring demeanor  
9  
10 was key to creating a climate of safety for patients, and that swearing would be especially  
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12 unprofessional. In addition, a male U.S. executive discussed how he never swore in front of large  
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14 groups and only with peers, while a female UK lawyer depicted the taboo as “*a gentleman’s*  
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16 *agreement, that you should not swear when at work.*”  
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20 Swearing taboos also differed per occupation: forbidden situations included specific  
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22 professional contacts such as patients for doctors, clients for most business executives, as well as  
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24 specific places or times such as the court for lawyers. For example, a UK male business  
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26 executive explained that adapting one’s language to the audience was considered part of the core  
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28 management skills.  
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31 In our sample, both male and female interviewees admitted to swearing. However, some  
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33 French female professionals used swearing to assert their identity and earn respect from their  
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35 male colleagues:  
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38 *“I swear to be respected as a woman in a job [engineering] and in a company that is*  
39  
40 *rather masculine.”* (Business executive, Female, FR)

41  
42 *“I have to show that I can go rough and rude, I don’t like it, but it is necessary.”*  
43  
44 (Business executive, Female, FR)

45  
46 Such affirmative swearing occurred a lot more in male-dominated environments:  
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48  
49 *“A lot, definitely, especially in a men’s environment... when I started work, I was hearing*  
50  
51 *F F F everywhere... All males pretty much use the F word.”* (Business executive, Female, UK)

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53 Interestingly as well, the same female professionals used swear words that are clearly sexual, or  
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55 target men or women separately, such as “couillon” (turd) for men and “garce” (bitch) for  
56  
57 women. They were very aware of gender differences and norms, and were navigating them to  
58  
59 their advantage. French men too used sexually connoted words and words targeted to men or  
60

1 women only such as “enfoiré” (mother\*\*\*er), “bordel” (whorehouse) and “putain” (whore).  
2  
3  
4 Similarly, in the U.S., a male lawyer discussed how he refers to one female attorney as  
5  
6 “c\*\*\*erella” because he thought she was very “bitchy”. One interviewee mentioned how age and  
7  
8 social class mattered, implying that managers and professionals might swear less than blue collar  
9  
10 workers:

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12 *“The younger colleagues tend to swear a lot more. Also, our manual workers tend to*  
13  
14 *swear a lot.”* (Business executive, Male, FR)  
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### 17 18 19 20 *Degrees of profanity*

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22 Interviewees made a distinction between “soft swearing” and “hard swearing”, for example  
23  
24 using “*bollocks, or piss*” as soft swearing words (Business executive, Male, UK). Some  
25  
26 interviewees also distinguished between well-established swear words and the insulting or  
27  
28 derogatory language that they admitted to using, despite negative connotations:  
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30  
31 *“We might use insulting language rather than the common swear words... we may refer*  
32  
33 *to a patient as ‘little old lady’.”* (Doctor, Male, UK)  
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35  
36 Further, a distinction was made between swearing and speaking rudely, for example when  
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38 *“Partners [are] rude and shout when stressed, but they don’t directly swear at you.”* (Lawyer,  
39  
40 Female, UK). Some words were more taboo than others, particularly in our corporate sample:

41  
42 *“I may say ‘the whole situation is completely bollocks’ or ‘that person should F off’. I*  
43  
44 *don’t use the whole F word, I tone it down.”* (Business executive, Male, UK)  
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### 47 48 49 *Workplace media through which swearing occurs*

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51 Our analysis showed that swearing did not take place in formal meetings, written  
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53 communications (letters/memos), phone conversations, or emails. Instead, face-to-face swearing  
54  
55 between colleagues was the most frequent. Participants discussed how swearing occurred with  
56  
57 close colleagues and never with clients (UK female lawyer) or subordinates (U.S., Business  
58  
59 executive): *‘You can never swear in front of top management, conferences or meetings’*  
60

1  
2 (Business executive, Female, FR). One French male manager explained that, typically, meeting  
3 participants maintain a good level of language during large official meetings and wait until the  
4 end of the meeting when they gather in small groups to express their frustration or disagreement  
5 in swear words, if they are confident this will not be overheard by management.  
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### 10 11 12 13 *Positive outcomes of swearing at work*

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15 *Individual benefits.* Interviewees felt they gain individual benefits from swearing like  
16 recovering from stress and expressing certain emotions (anger, frustration): “*It’s a mechanism*  
17 *for venting*” (Business executive, Male, U.S.). Some of them argued that “*people swear without*  
18 *thinking*” (Lawyer, Male, UK), it is a way to deal with stress, it helps relieve stress, it airs  
19 frustration, sets the basis for responsibility when things go wrong, or breaks a latent conflict.  
20 Specific sources of other-related swearing included dangerous situations (e.g., a mentally-ill  
21 patient behaving violently), others playing power games (e.g., a doctor arguing with a radiologist  
22 who was refusing to examine a patient) and suppliers not reaching quality standards. A UK male  
23 executive discussed how swearing was used at work to make a point and to create “*cathartic*  
24 *relief*” within a very stressful work environment. Similarly, a U.S. male doctor discussed how  
25 swearing “*might allow for a release of tension, so it might make you feel better*” and a make  
26 U.S. executive explained that swearing is “*used for therapy*”.  
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42 Other interviewees mentioned that they used swearing as a buffering transition ritual to  
43 protect their home and family domain from professional tensions. For instance, a French female  
44 lawyer explained she swore after speaking in court and that she thought of it as a way to let  
45 steam off before being with her children.; in addition, she enjoyed the contrast with the highly  
46 polished and technical language.  
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53 Furthermore, lawyers and business executives suggested that swearing helped them cope  
54 and foster resilience after performing taxing emotional work with a client or a team member. For  
55 instance, a UK female sales director compared swearing with smoking a cigarette, she saw it as a  
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1  
2 physiological need after a difficult client negotiation, to express her sadness or her  
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4 disappointment and move on to the next call:

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6 *“It is a really good way of expressing yourself. A good way to release this energy and*  
7  
8 *agony, sometimes it can help a lot, like slamming the doors, the F word can be as helpful*  
9  
10 *and as effective as this.”* (Business executive, Female, UK)

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15 *Interpersonal benefits.* Interviewees believed using rough language can get someone’s  
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17 attention or emphasize something. Team leaders in particular said that swearing, because it  
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19 contrasted with the usual politically correct professional language, conveyed authority, and even  
20  
21 a sense of urgency. In short, swearing was a way to get an important job done more quickly. For  
22  
23 instance, French business executives use the term “gueuler” (yell) to make one’s point to  
24  
25 management, in order *“to galvanize troops... they understand I am not satisfied”* (Business  
26  
27 executive, Male, FR). The feeling that *“it is necessary to go aggressive to get the work done by*  
28  
29 *others”*(Business executive, Male, FR) and that it helped *“to motivate others, to make them face*  
30  
31 *what was at stake with the project”* (Business executive, Male, FR) was also noted by business  
32  
33 executives and lawyers in the UK and U.S.: *“When trying to convey a message across”*  
34  
35 (Business executive, Male, UK); *“[I swear] once in a while for effect around here”* (Lawyer,  
36  
37 Female, U.S.). Likewise, a U.S. male executive said that *“rudeness is part of getting the job*  
38  
39 *done”*. Similarly, U.S. interviewees mentioned using swearing for humor and to get the other  
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41 person’s attention:  
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47 *“I call them a perfect rectal aperture... Also known as assholes... It’s humorous... It gets*  
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49 *their attention...”* (Lawyer, Male, U.S.)

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51 *“We also swear for effect... The intention is to emphasize humor... It helps lighten the*  
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53 *conversation when the people you know are very tolerant of it and you know no one is*  
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55 *going to be offended by it.”* (Business executive, Male, U.S.)

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57  
58 We also found occurrences of swearing used to establish interpersonal relationships. For  
59  
60 example, a male UK executive noted that *“if me and colleagues swear when discussing*

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2 something, this proves an easiness that we have with one another, a good relationship to the  
3 extent of being able to speak to each other like mates do.” Similarly, one lawyer stated that  
4 swearing introduced fun in the workplace, provided it was well targeted interpersonally:  
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8  
9 “It makes working much more fun, you get to know your colleagues. Of course, you  
10 simply cannot swear with some other colleagues and definitely not with bosses.”  
11  
12 (Lawyer, Female, UK).  
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15 Likewise, other interviewees saw swearing as a signal that one is comfortable and willing  
16 to exchange with coworkers on an informal and more vulnerable basis:  
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20 “Sometimes [swearing is used] to better communicate your true feelings about a topic...  
21 It can lead to an apology which can actually strengthen a relationship.” (Business  
22 executive, Male, U.S.)  
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25  
26 “If me and colleagues swear when discussing something, this proves an easiness that we  
27 have with one another, a good relationship to the extent of being able to speak to each  
28 other like mates do.” (Business executive, Male, UK)  
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32  
33 In particular, it was not unusual to see some employees clarifying their positions after a  
34 meeting discreetly in small groups, “some bad words can come out, especially if the meeting has  
35 been tense” (Business executive, Female, FR).  
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40 On a more controversial note, swearing was sometimes used to affirm status in an  
41 aggressive way and to intimidate clients, judges, CEOs or suppliers:  
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45 “I have had situations where I have screamed at clients and told them that they were  
46 being...assholes... it wakes them up...” (Lawyer, Male, U.S.)  
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49  
50 “Swearing helps to break the ice, to be heard, to make others work at your own pace... to  
51 intimidate others.” (Business executive, Male, FR)  
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56 *Group benefits.* Because swearing was perceived as taboo in the presence of clients or  
57 patients, swearing within the group conveyed a sense of belonging, and mutual trust, which was  
58 perceived to increase group affiliation, bonding and cohesion: “Part of the way you socialize at  
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2 *work*” (Lawyer, Female, UK); *“a type of joking”* (Business executive, Female, UK). Thus, some  
3  
4 of our interviewees analyzed other-directed swearing as a group phenomenon indicative of group  
5  
6 membership:

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8  
9 *“This thing is between the people that spend 8 hours each day in the same office, for the*  
10  
11 *past two and a half years. So it is different, we are like friends.”* (Business executive,  
12  
13 Male, UK)

14  
15 Evidence of group contagion was present:

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17  
18 *“... You have group dynamics. One person swears and all of a sudden everyone in that*  
19  
20 *group swears. It is contagious.”*(Lawyer, Female, UK)

21  
22 Swearing was seen by many interviewees as a way to conform to group norms. For  
23  
24 instance, several medical doctors indicated that they considered swearing as a bad professional  
25  
26 practice, but still used it to behave in accordance with their organizational culture:

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28  
29 *“‘S\*\*\*’ sometimes. I might use other swearing words like the ‘f word’ but only as part of*  
30  
31 *everyday conversations that I am having with colleagues. And only because this is the*  
32  
33 *‘norm’, this is how we tell stories between us.”* (Doctor, Male, UK)

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35  
36 *“This is the organizational culture. It is a friendly/swearing environment, our CEO will*  
37  
38 *come up and swear at us, in a joking way.”* (Business executive, Female, UK)

39  
40 Group norms and the organizational culture thus reinforced each other and fostered  
41  
42 swearing:

43  
44 *“It becomes part of the way you socialize at work.”* (Lawyer, Female, UK)

45  
46  
47 *“I adapt my language to their language, so if they are very professional and they don’t*  
48  
49 *swear then I don’t, but if they do and they frequently swear then I match my language to*  
50  
51 *their language.”* (Business executive, Male, UK)

#### 52 53 54 55 *Reactions to swearing in the workplace*

56  
57 Swearing at work has not backfired for the majority of interviewees. As one respondent  
58  
59 commented: *‘Swearing is not a crime if people don’t take offence’* (Lawyer, Female, UK). When  
60

1 probed more specifically about their reactions to swearing at the workplace, these depended  
2  
3 upon the profession. Doctors mentioned that if some swearing takes place occasionally, they  
4  
5 ignore it. However, if there was an individual who was swearing frequently, they would try to  
6  
7 address it. Doctors and lawyers stated that swearing is not socially acceptable in their profession  
8  
9 and that people would be shocked if it happened as it would show a lack of respect (e.g. towards  
10  
11 patients or the court), leadership skills (e.g. doctors leading teams) and control:  
12  
13

14  
15 *“Swearing is not socially acceptable in my workplace... In a legal environment you are*  
16  
17 *sort of expected to always remain calm in any situation and use your logic to resolve*  
18  
19 *issues. It is expected that you will not be in an escalating situation and that you would seek*  
20  
21 *to solve the issue in another way.”* (Lawyer, Female, UK).  
22  
23

24 Some business executives seemed to be more accustomed to swearing and tended not to  
25  
26 pay particular attention when it is happening. But others acknowledged the negative  
27  
28 consequences of swearing. One interviewee mentioned that swearing against superiors is nearly  
29  
30 impossible *“unless you don’t care about keeping your job”* (Business executive, Female, FR).  
31  
32 French interviewees mentioned that swearing can have negative consequences when it creates  
33  
34 conflict, or when it degrades your image and affects the degree to which people want to work  
35  
36 with you:  
37  
38

39  
40 *“[swearing] may even hinder me from being promoted or benefit from special*  
41  
42 *treatments.”*(Business executive, Female, FR).  
43

44 In addition, as one manager stated, the extent of swearing at work did in some instances  
45  
46 cause problems with customers:  
47

48  
49 *“My role is business development so I am trying to sell the company to the clients. So I*  
50  
51 *am wasting my time when I am saying “we are such a great company, work with us” and*  
52  
53 *then at the background someone is saying F F F, or F this client, or F that client.”*  
54  
55 (Business executive, Female, UK).  
56

57 Further, swearing was acknowledged as a potential problem in front of religious  
58  
59 colleagues. In one case, a male UK doctor discussed how they refrained from using profanity in  
60

1  
2 the presence of a religious Christian colleague and how a distressed doctor uttered several words  
3  
4 of profanity in front of a sensitive secretary who filed a formal complaint. Similarly, a male U.S.  
5  
6 business executive described swearing as “*unprofessional... offensive to a third party*”.  
7  
8

#### 9 10 11 *Management’s views on swearing at work*

12  
13 When asked about the top management’s views on workplace swearing, the majority of  
14  
15 interviewees believed that swearing, although not encouraged, had never been addressed by  
16  
17 senior management, nor were they aware of any company swearing policy, although they were  
18  
19 aware of policies on equality, diversity, customer service and a general conduct of respect.  
20  
21 Lawyers and business executives in the UK and U.S. referred to an understanding that the  
22  
23 company expects them to “*use common sense*” (Business executive, Male, UK) and act “*within*  
24  
25 *reason*” (Business executive, Male, U.S.). Participants also mentioned that they were aware of  
26  
27 unwritten rules of acceptable conduct and professional behavior.  
28  
29

30  
31 “*You learn it and you’re taught through feedback. And you develop a sense of what you*  
32  
33 *think is appropriate versus inappropriate but it is not written.*” (Business executive, Male,  
34  
35 U.S.)  
36  
37

#### 38 39 40 *Country differences*

41  
42 Throughout our analysis, we have pointed to differences between our American, French  
43  
44 and British samples. While our sample may not allow for generalization, we noted three main  
45  
46 differences: (a) gender differences were salient in the discourse of French interviewees, not  
47  
48 British or U.S. interviewees; (b) attention to degrees of profanity and subtle differences between  
49  
50 swearing and insulting language were found in the UK and U.S. sample, not the French sample;  
51  
52 and (c) U.S. interviewees, particularly U.S. lawyers, think of swearing as something less serious  
53  
54 and even see the humorous side of it. U.S. interviewees even talked about using swearing to sort  
55  
56 out disagreements and further strengthen relationships. Swearing is used for socialization  
57  
58 (mainly UK), for making a point or emphasizing something (all) and relieving tension (all). Yet,  
59  
60



1  
2 there were many similarities, such as the executives' use of swearing as a motivation tool to  
3  
4 make their team aware of the importance and urgency of a specific task or project and get the  
5  
6 work done.  
7  
8  
9

## 10 11 **Discussion and Conclusion**

12  
13 Our findings indicate that social swearing (Jay, 2000; Montagu, 2001), although formally  
14  
15 unacceptable, does occur at most levels within different organizational contexts and professions.  
16  
17 Unlike the assumption that swearing would not occur in high profile occupations (Sliter *et al.*,  
18  
19 2012), we found that it does. This is in stark contrast to the more traditional view that, as a  
20  
21 professional, one's duty is to be civil (Fritz, 2013) frequently also due to a fear of losing  
22  
23 reputation and authority amongst peers or clients (Andersen, 2009; Miller, 2000).  
24  
25

26  
27 The most common cited reason for swearing were everyday stressors (Baruch and Jenkins,  
28  
29 2007) which made individuals seek emotional release (Dewe and Gueast, 1990). Swearing was  
30  
31 mostly found to occur face-to-face or through informal encounters because of professional  
32  
33 language expectations (Johnson and Lewis, 2010), professional norms (Andersen, 2009) and  
34  
35 expected behaviors at work (Miller, 2000). Furthermore, our analysis identified both positive and  
36  
37 negative outcomes of swearing at work.  
38  
39

40  
41 At the individual level, swearing was reported as enabling the relief of stress and the  
42  
43 expression of emotions such as anger and frustration (Jay and Janschewitz, 2008; Johnson and  
44  
45 Indvik, 2001) by creating a cathartic relief for the individual (Dewe and Guest, 1990). Particular  
46  
47 reference was made to swearing as a means for coping with emotional work. At the interpersonal  
48  
49 level, swearing was used to get attention (Young, 2004), emphasize a point, convey authority  
50  
51 (Lindebaum and Fielden, 2011) or a sense of urgency. Interestingly, we found a link between  
52  
53 swearing and humor with many participants using swearing in a humorous way to develop  
54  
55 friendships at work (Young, 2004), similarly to Montagu's (2001) finding of swearing occurring  
56  
57 in interpersonal relationships with the purpose of creating or developing social group  
58  
59 membership or in-group solidarity. This finding links with positive outcomes of swearing at the  
60

1  
2 group level, such as swearing for creating a sense of belonging, mutual trust, group affiliation,  
3  
4 bonding and cohesion, similarly to Baruch's and Jenkin's (2007) social aspects of swearing for  
5  
6 group solidarity and cohesion. Taking this a step further, we also found that swearing was also  
7  
8 seen as part of the informal organizational culture, although management did not actively  
9  
10 encourage this practice. The most prominent negative outcomes were perceptions of lack of  
11  
12 respect (Pearson *et al.*, 2001), lack of leadership skills, lack of control, potential to create  
13  
14 conflict, and potential to degrade one's image (Stone *et al.*, 2010). We also saw how swearing  
15  
16 was used in a purposefully aggressive way to exert power on suppliers and business partners  
17  
18  
19  
20 (Moore, 2004).

21  
22 In terms of gender differences, swearing was reported as beneficial to female professionals  
23  
24 who wanted to demonstrate assertiveness in male-dominated environments (Limbrick, 1991).  
25  
26 Swearing was used as a resource for identity construction (Stapleton, 2003) to earn respect from  
27  
28 their male colleagues.  
29

30  
31 Our study contributes to three bodies of work. Firstly, we add to the  
32  
33 professional/workplace (in)civility theory (e.g. Hadley, 2014; Hershcovis and Reich, 2013;  
34  
35 Priesemuth *et al.*, 2013; Scott *et al.*, 2014; Sears and Humiston, 2015; Shao *et al.*, 2011; Soylyu  
36  
37 and Sheehy-Skeffington, 2015; van Kleef, 2014) by shedding light on the under-researched  
38  
39 positive outcomes of swearing. Secondly, we add to the emotional labor literature which  
40  
41 predominantly argues for the suppression of negative emotions at work (e.g. Kramer and Hess,  
42  
43 2002; Lively, 2000) by offering to explore the potentially positive aspects of 'negative'  
44  
45 behaviors such as swearing at work. As such, we add to the growing body of research studying  
46  
47 the potential asymmetrical effects of emotion-sharing in the workplace (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 2005;  
48  
49 Gibson and Callister, 2010; Gray *et al.*, 2011; Kennedy-Moore and Watson, 2001; Lindebaum  
50  
51 and Fielden, 2011). Thirdly, we add to the literature on social norms for professionals (Andersen,  
52  
53 2009; Miller, 2000; Johnson and Lewis, 2010; Sliter *et al.*, 2012) by arguing against the  
54  
55 traditionalist view that workplace incivility should be tackled and eliminated (Jay and  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2 Janschewitz, 2008; Johnson and Indvik, 2001; Pearson *et al.*, 2000 Rassin and Muris, 2005;  
3  
4 Young, 2004).

5  
6 Our research was limited to three occupations in three countries. Future studies may be  
7  
8 conducted in more cultures, covering more cultural clusters, and explore a wider set of  
9  
10 professions. We also call for quantitative surveys that measure the positive and negative  
11  
12 outcomes of workplace swearing.  
13

14  
15 Our study has practical implications for business leaders. Our findings imply that although  
16  
17 workplace swearing cannot be recommended, or perhaps not even tolerated, many employees  
18  
19 have a natural need to swear, either as a stress release mechanism, to emphasize an issue, or to  
20  
21 build rapport,. Not every use of bad language represents a hostile work environment and a “zero  
22  
23 tolerance” policy might backfire (Geddes and Stickney, 2011). Therefore, it might be relevant  
24  
25 for managers to be flexible regarding swearing, by considering what the swearers’ intention was  
26  
27 and whether the audience may suffer consequences before sanctioning the swearing. Discussing  
28  
29 swearing with one’s team when it occurs too frequently or may be hurtful may be an avenue to  
30  
31 consider. Last, advice should be given to everyone in the workplace on the need to think before  
32  
33 you speak.  
34  
35

36  
37 In conclusion, we hope that this study can help to nuance scholars’, practitioners’ and  
38  
39 policy makers’ understanding of swearing at the workplace.  
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**Table 1***Description of the sample*

	<b>UK</b>	<b>FR</b>	<b>U.S.</b>
<b>Lawyers</b>	7 (4 male, 3 female)  Senior Partner, M, 49 Partner, M, 39 Solicitor, M, 27 Solicitor, M, 35  Partner, F, 43 Solicitor, F, 34 Solicitor, F, 32	3 (female)  Lawyer, F, 42 Lawyer, F, 44 Lawyer, F, 48	4 (2 male, 2 female)  Senior Attorney, M, 50-59 Owner/Attorney, M, 50-59  Divorce Lawyer, F, 30-39 Attorney, F, age undisclosed
<b>Medical doctors</b>	7 (3 male, 4 female)  Endocrinologist, M, 62 Gastroenterologist, M, 48 Anesthesiologist, M, 45  General Practitioner, F, 52 General practitioner, F, 58 Dentist, F, 53 Emergency Doctor, F, 56	6 (3 male, 3 female)  Hospital Intern, M, 27 Dietician, M, 28 Psychiatrist, M, 33  Medical Social Worker, F, 26 Autism Specialist, F, 33 Psychiatrist & Head of Department, F, 47	2 (male)  Physician, M, 50-59 Colo-rectal Surgeon, M, 60-69
<b>Business executives</b>	7 (6 male, 1 female)  HR Business Partner, M, 31 Marketing Manager, M, 32 Business Development Manager, M, 34 HR Manager, M, 38 E-Marketing Manager, M, 40 General Manager, M, 57  Business support consultant, F, 20-29	11 (7 male, 4 female)  Project Leader, M, 30 Project Leader, M, 31 Industrial Product Manager, M, 31 Industrial Director, M, 33 IT Manager, M, 33 IT Manager, M, 33 Asset Manager, M, 34  Accounting Manager, F, 24 Communications Engineer, F, 25 Brand Manager, F, 27 Event Manager, F, 33	4 (male)  President/Principle, M, 50-59 Branch Manager, M, 50-59 CEO, M, 50-59 Senior Director, M, 50-59
<b>Other</b>		1 Army Colonel, M, 50	
<b>Total</b>	<b>21 interviews</b>	<b>21 interviews</b>	<b>10 interviews</b>

**Table 2: Key themes and associated open codes derived during the data analysis process**

<b>Core themes</b>	<b>Open codes</b>
1. Nature	“swear words”, “derogatory language”, “soft swearing”, “frequency”, “degree”
2. Causes	“stress”, “after making mistake”, “meetings”, “pressure of deadline”, “pressure of interacting with patients (doctors)”, “don’t like colleagues”, “frustration”, “disagreement”, “anger”
3. Attitudes	“unacceptable”, “unprofessional”, “taboos”, “management skills”, “respect (women)”, “gendered swear words”, “workgroup culture”, “social class”, “leadership”
4. Workplace media	“formal meetings”, “written communications”, “phone conversations”, “informal emails”, “face-to-face”
5. Positive outcomes	“stress relief”, “express anger”, “express frustration”, “break conflict”, “assign responsibility”, “power”, “manage suppliers”, “spillover of professional tensions to family domain”, “coping mechanism”, “draw attention”, “emphasis”, “authority”, “sense of urgency”, “humor”, “motivation”, “build rapport”, “make a point”, “effective communication”, “disempower person”, “build trust”, “group affiliation/belonging”, “group bonding”, “group cohesion”
6. Negative outcomes	“reactions from colleagues”, “lack of respect”, “unprofessional”, “not accepted by management”, “impact on customer relations”
7. Management views	“accepted”, “not accepted”, “policies”, “un-written rules”