Psychological Underpinning of Slanging

To the Editor,

Slanging is a universal phenomenon. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines “slang” as to attack with angry, uncontrolled language. The use of slanging has been documented in all cultures around the globe; but in every part of the world, it has been poorly researched. Slanging differs from one society to another. Slanging is also used to express annoyance and rage. Slanging is also used to punish, humiliate, and abuse people. Slanging can have both overt and covert meanings. Sometimes, there is not much distinction between the overt and covert meanings (i.e., with some slanging, the covert meaning is the intended meaning and is traumatizing). The interpretation of the meaning of slanging depends on the personal values and beliefs and the society to which the individual belongs. Accordingly, an individual may judge slanging as good or bad. People also indulge in slanging to socialize with people from a similar culture. Slanging is socially forbidden and tabooed due to its vulgarity. Slanging content may include negative connotations regarding racism, social status, and sexuality. Negative sexual connotations are one of the most widely used slang materials. The sexual contents in slanging can be related to gender identity, sexual orientation, forbidden sexual relationships (incestuous relationship with mother, sister, father), adultery, and anatomy of distorted genitals. Sexual contents in slanging also depict the sexual intercourse, masturbation as well as menstruation. Variations in slanging across gender have also been...
observed. Specifically, slanging by men are often more sexually colored than women, and this may be explained by greater culturally sanctioned inhibition and conservativeness of females in comparison to males. Similarly, people of deprived and lower socio-economic strata, often indulge in slanging. The definition of “slang” is often discussed in reference to people of low and disreputable character. It explains why words used in slanging are considered forbidden for respectable persons in society. This phenomenon may accrue from peer learning, lack of parental control, and a higher level of frustration that may find expression through slanging. When we speak about slanging and its consequences, it is important to understand what we refer to. Individuals with certain personality disorders (antisocial) or conduct disorders or having a predisposition for the same, often indulge in slanging.

Lack of research hinders our understanding of the psychological correlates of slanging, across various ages and cultures. Below, we outline a few psychological observations that may explain the phenomenon.

1. Is it an instinct?
As the phenomenon has prevailed across the cultures, it could be an instinctual reaction of humans.

2. Is it a defense mechanism/sub-conscious response of the mind?
The individual doing slanging might have suppressed erotic fantasies or desires that are getting ventilated or channelized aggressively. This may also explain the use of such words by many people during sexual encounters.

3. Is it an expression of aggression?
It could be a way of ventilating the aggression.

4. Is it a learned behavior?
It could be shaped by social learning as it is widely prevalent in society. It has been hypothesized that slanging is the prototype of language and social behavior. This may explain why people indulging in slanging are able to socialize and familiarize themselves with each other.

5. Is sexual taboo universal?
Sexuality, with its associated taboos, is considered a very private issue. Words selected in the slanging are aimed at such deeply private and personal problems that are often more painful for the person for whom slanging is intended. Abuse and bullying by slanging at school, online platforms, including social media, and various other platforms of the society (family, neighborhood, etc.) are not uncommon. The psychology (psychodynamics) of the perpetrators who abuse or bully people by slanging need to be understood. It may help in the subsequent psychological intervention for these individuals. Further, recommendations may be given to the reform schools and centers that deal with perpetrators who abuse and bully others. Similarly, slanging in pathological forms are seen in conditions like coprolalia, which may be a reflection of underlying psychiatric disorder (particularly organic brain disorders). Further research into how the obscene words or phrases are learnt may give insight into the phenomenon of slanging in coprolalia. As people learn slanging commonly in the early formative years of life and because it is used across ages (children, adolescents, adults, and elderly), it is important to understand the phenomenon of slanging from a developmental perspective. This understanding may help in planning age-specific interventions.

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