To maleappropriate: coining a term for a familiar pattern of behaviour

In the mid-1980s, while a philosophy graduate at a German university, I was invited to participate in a reading group of professors and assistant professors. I was the only student. I also was the only woman. It took three meetings before I worked up the courage to suggest a way of interpreting the set text we read, some contemporary piece on legal philosophy. Everyone was quiet while I talked. Then, as if I hadn't spoken, discussion was resumed. Perhaps three or five minutes later, one of the male participants repeated, in different words, the point I had made. And immediately it was eagerly discussed. I was slightly bemused. Mainly, I thought that the point, though seemingly the same, must have been different from mine since it got a response. Over the weeks during which I attended this reading group, the same scenario was repeated virtually every time I said something. There were two kinds of responses, to be fair. Either what I said was in a polite manner completely ignored; or something very close to what I had said was proposed by someone else a little later, and then picked up by the group. After two semesters I stopped going, for what reason exactly I cannot remember. At that point I had never read any feminist theory and it did not occur to me that there was a gendered element to what was happening. And only much later did I learn that the presiding most senior professor had once said after a viva, in so many words, "Frauen können nicht philosophieren" ("women can't do philosophy").

In the mid-1990s, I was contributing to a volume to which a much-cherished former advisor also contributed. He read over the earliest version of my piece, and I read over the latest of his. At some point I noted a few lines that seemed rather familiar. The content of a footnote that I had cut for reasons of space looked at me from the page. Since I still had the footnote from the earlier version that my former mentor had read, I re-sent it and remarked on the similarity. He was utterly embarrassed and ashamed. I am one hundred percent certain he did not knowingly appropriate my lines. He amended them, and in a later publication in the preface he writes something like "I'm sure I've stolen several things from two papers by … ."

In the mid-2010s, meanwhile with academic standing and honours of my own, I am invited to be part of a senior committee, filled with

people of equal academic standing. I am not the only woman. I am self-confident enough to say something at the first meeting. It is in the third meeting that I notice that what I had just said has not been taken notice of, but shortly after something very similar suggested by a male colleague is adopted into the proceedings. Something feels familiar, but I lack the presence of mind to say anything. It happens a second time, and I notice too late to say anything. The third time I blurt out "and how does what A suggests differ from what I suggested earlier?" After brief reflection the –always punctiliously fair chair of the committee remarks "It doesn't really, does it?"

Of course, at least since the 1990s, and most probably much earlier, the phenomenon I am describing has been mentioned again and again in feminist literature, in magazine articles, on blogs, in comments. We find it depicted in novels and short stories – and in cartoons![1] It is a frequent and familiar pattern. And it hasn't changed (much). We can now subsume it under the terms "implicit bias" or "unconscious bias." But we need a name for it. A word that is as suitable to denote a pattern of behaviour as the delightful "mansplaining" is. Without such a term, we will keep wasting time in conveying situations like the above, when we would much rather move on. More importantly, without such a term it is more difficult to identify, and even to recognize in the first instance, the pattern of behaviour in question. I here suggest the verb "to maleappropriate", with the cognates "maleappropriating" "maleappropriation" and "maleappropriator". The English language already contains the adjective "malappropriate" as a synonym to "inappropriate" and the verb "malappropriate" as a synonym to "misappropriate" (both without the "e", *nota bene*) – a fact that seems to recommend the coinage of 'maleappropriating' nicely. And I believe that the two-word phrase "male appropriation" may already be used in casual discourse for the behaviour described.

You may say that what I call maleappropriating is really a matter of power, not gender, so the term is no good. To this the response is the usual: yes, of course it is a matter of power. And once the gender power dynamics have changed sufficiently, we can shelve the suggested expression. Until then, we want and need a label for the phenomenon in its gendered manifestation, precisely to hasten the demise of its

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[1] http://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I0000eHEXGJ_wImQ

denotation. And unless and until someone comes up with something better, I propose we use "maleappropriating". Here are some examples of use: "I think John maleappropriated what Mariam just said." "Did you notice him maleappropriating her suggestion from two minutes ago?" "Don't you maleappropriate me, dude!" "What can we do to reduce maleappropriation?"

Actually, the last sentence is a good question. Now that we have a name for the unwelcome incidents, how *can* we reduce them? And here "we" means everyone, since the fact that some of us are women does not necessarily make us immune to being maleappropriators. I make a few suggestions, in the hope that others may add more. First of all, I think it is good if we become more aware of when maleappropriating occurs. If this is the first time you've ever heard of this kind of situation, perhaps getting into the habit of listening when women speak in public is a promising first step. Second, if a woman, say Leah, made a suggestion p that was subsequently ignored, but which you think should be taken into account, then don't just say 'p'. 'I, too, believe that p' is only marginally better. 'I agree with Leah's suggestion that p' or 'As Leah just said, p' may be appropriate. In short, we should always acknowledge the source. We should do so even if we were to say that p irrespective of Leah having just said it – because bystanders can't tell the difference. Third, if we witness a case of maleappropriation, we could bring it to people's attention. Perhaps we say, "That seems to be just what Leah said" and if applicable, add "and I agree with it" (or "and I disagree, because ..." – agreement is not the point, acknowledgement is.) Fourth, if you are at the receiving end, if you have been maleappropriated, and if the circumstances seem right, you could make it known. Fifth and finally, if we are caught out on a case of maleappropriating, what do we do? It appears to me that some degree of embarrassment and shame are quite apposite first reactions. After that, making things right seems a good idea. And I trust that most of us have the resources to figure out how.

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