Sex Roles, Vol. 9, No. 5, 1983

Sex-Role Related Effects of Sex Bias in Language[1]

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Despite recent efforts to eliminate sexist language from journal and other publications, controversy persists over whether sexist language contributes to the perpetuation of sex bias. Seventy-two female and 57 male undergraduates were exposed to three levels of sexist noun and pronoun usage in a description of "Ethical Standards of Psychologists." All subjects then rated the attractiveness of a career in psychology for males and females, and their own willingness to refer a male or female friend to a psychologist. In several instances, ratings of career attractiveness and willingness to refer were found to vary in sex-role stereotypic directions as a function of degree of exposure to sexist language. Recent demands for nonsexist language may be supportable on the basis of a genuine relationship between sexist language and the maintenance of sex-biased perceptions.

Responding to the concern first voiced by the Women's Movement, academic psychology is striving to eliminate sexist language from its repertoire. Noting that "long established cultural practice can exert a powerful insidious influence over even the most conscientious author," the American Psychological Association (1977) recently established "Guidelines for Nonsexist Language in APA Journals." Similarly, many publishing houses now specify nonsexist language in the manuscripts they review (Harper & Row, 1976; Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976; Prentice-Hall, 1975; Random House, 1975). These policy changes reflect a growing concern that language implying male superiority not only is insulting to women but also may encourage or support sexist behaviors and perceptions.

[1]Portions of this article were presented as a paper at the annual meeting of the Canadian Psychological Association, Calgary, Alberta, June 1980. The authors wish to thank Stephen Abramowitz for his suggestions and comments on an earlier draft of this article.
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0360-0025/83/0500-0625$03.00/0

While sexist language has been linked conceptually to sexist behavior by various authors (e.g., Blaubergs, 1978; Bodine, 1975; Association for Women in Psychology, Note 1), controversy remains over whether sexist language can, in fact, affect social behavior. The primary rationale for denying the impact of linguistic sex bias seems to be that sexist language is an epiphenomenon of sexist culture, rather than the reverse (Moulton, Robinson & Ellias, 1978). According to this argument, modifying any sex discrimination implicit in current language usage would have little or no effect on sexism at the sociocultural level. Lakoff (1975), for example, states that "at best, language change influences changes in attitudes slowly and indirectly, and these changes in attitude will not be reflected in social change unless society is receptive already" (p. 47). Opponents of this view typically cite the well-known Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1956), which, while acknowledging cultural effects on language, also posits a reciprocal effect of language upon perception and, therefore, upon cognition and behavior.

Few empirical studies have attempted to relate sexist language to sex bias. Bem and Bem (1973) presented two studies in which sex-biased wording of "help wanted" newspaper ads decreased both male and female interest in opposite-sex jobs. In a study by Moulton et al. (1978), supposedly "neutral" generic male pronouns ("he", "his", etc.) led subjects to think of males first, although the context implied both sexes. Brannon (Note 2) has reported that when an applicant for an executive position was described as a "girl," subjects rated her as less "tough," "dignified," "mature," and "brilliant," and awarded her an average of $6,000 less per year in salary than when the word "woman" was used.

It might be argued, however, that the language used as stimuli in the Bem and Bem (1973) and Brannon (Note 2) studies was blatant in terms of sexist word choice and might be less common in current English usage than other, more covert forms of linguistic sex bias. Bem and Bem (1973), for example, assessed female interest in positions described by statements such as "We're looking for outdoor men!" Similarly, Brannon's (Note 2) reference to a 31-year-old executive as "an attractive dark-haired girl" may have presented a significant degree of disparity to the undergraduate subjects in that experiment. While Moulton et al.'s. (1978) well-designed study examined the more subtle (and pervasive) phenomenon of generic male pronoun usage, the authors' intent was primarily to identify the associational responses to these pronoun forms. Actual effects of these associations were not evaluated.

The current investigation was concerned with the possible effects of less obvious types of sexist word choice on perceptions and rating behaviors. Language of the type common to formal communications between behavioral scientists was chosen for analysis, given the probable subtlety of

sexist language usage in professional discourse and the potential importance of any sex-biasing effects that might occur. To this end, stimuli for the present study were drawn from the text of the "Ethical Standards of Psychologists" (American Psychological Association, 1972) before its most recent two revisions (American Psychological Association, 1977, 1979) and compared to the same text after correction for sexist language. It was hypothesized that exposure to the sexist (uncorrected) text would bias subject perceptions of "psychology" in the direction of greater sex-role stereotypy than would exposure to the nonsexist (corrected) version.

METHOD

Procedure

Seventy-two female and 57 male undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of three experimental groups. Each group was presented with a different version of the first paragraph of the 1972 APA "Ethical Standards of Psychologists." Version 1 was the uncorrected text, which is presented below:

> The psychologist believes in the dignity and worth of the individual human being. He is committed to increasing man's understanding of himself and others. While pursuing this endeavor, he protects the welfare of any person who may seek his services or of any subjects, human or animal, that may be the object of his study. He does not use his professional position or relationships, nor does he knowingly permit his own services to be used by others, for purposes inconsistent with these values. While demanding for himself freedom of inquiry and communication, he accepts the responsibility this freedom confers: for competence where he claims it, for objectivity in the reports of his findings, and for consideration of the best interest of his colleagues and of society. (American Psychological Association, 1972)

Versions 2 and 3 were equivalent to version 1, but corrected for sexist language per recent American Psychological Association (1977) "Guidelines for Non-Sexist Language in APA Journals." In version 2, the masculine pronoun "he" was replaced with "he or she," while "she or he" was used in version 3. Versions 2 and 3 were identical in all other respects, specifically in the use of careful rephrasing to eliminate the generic masculine nouns found in version 1. Using a 7-point Likert scale, subjects from all three conditions rated psychology on its attractiveness "as a future career" for (a) men and (b) women, as well as their own willingness to refer (a) a male friend and (b) a female friend "with a psychological problem" to a psychologist. No references to the language used in the texts were made when the rating directions were given.

Analysis of Data

To examine the effects of subject sex and text version on the male and female attractiveness and male and female referral measures, four 2 × 3 ordered stepdown analyses of variance were performed. This conservative multivariate method considers the between-groups effects for a given (pth) dependent variable after the variance associated with all preceding ($p - 1$) dependent variables has been removed in a stepwise fashion (Finn, 1974). In the present context, the net result is equivalent to a series of four analyses of covariance, where each measure is evaluated across sex and text version with the remaining three measures serving as ordered covariates. The primary advantages of this approach are control over intercorrelation of dependent variables and ease of interpretability, as compared to discriminant function analysis.

RESULTS

Stepdown analysis revealed several sources of variance in the data, which are presented below for each effect. Means and standard deviations for each condition appear in Table I.

Subject Sex

Male subjects were significantly more willing to refer male friends to a psychologist than were female subjects, $F(1, 122) = 4.615$, $p = .034$. Conversely, female subjects were more willing to refer female friends to a psychologist than were male subjects, $F(1, 122) = 6.49$, $p = .012$. There were no subject sex differences in the perceived attractiveness of a career in psychology for either males or females.

Text Version

A single main effect of text version was revealed by the stepdown ANOVA on career attractiveness for women, $F(2, 122) = 3.974$, $p = .021$. According to post hoc Tukey tests, subjects exposed to version 1 (exclusively male nouns and pronouns) rated a career in psychology as less attractive for women than did either version 2 ("he or she" and neutral nouns) or version 3 ("she or he" and neutral nouns) subjects ($p < .025$ and $p < .05$, respectively).

Table I. Means and Standard Deviations for Males and Females in "He," "He/She," and "She/He" Text Conditions

	Males						Females					
	He		He/she		She/he		He		He/she		She/he	
Measure	$\bar{X}$	*SD*	$\bar{X}$	*SD*	$\bar{X}$	*SD*	$\bar{X}$	*SD*	$\bar{X}$	*SD*	$\bar{X}$	*SD*
Attractive to males	4.24	1.04	4.78	1.25	4.44	1.04	4.36	1.18	4.20	1.00	4.56	1.23
Attractive to females	4.29	.85	4.94	1.11	4.94	1.06	4.55	1.10	5.16	.80	5.04	1.27
Male referral	5.19	1.40	5.17	1.42	4.78	1.66	4.68	1.32	4.64	1.38	5.64	1.22
Female referral	4.67	1.68	5.17	1.50	4.78	1.59	4.91	1.34	4.92	1.19	5.76	1.23

Sex × Text Interaction

Sex of subject and text version interacted on subject willingness to refer a male friend to a psychologist, $F(2, 122) = 3.126, p = .048$. Analysis of simple effects (Winer, 1971) revealed greater female willingness to refer a male friend to a psychologist under "she or he" (version 3) than male willingness under the same version, $F(1, 122) = 4.007, p < .05$, or female willingness under either "he" (version 1) or "he or she" (version 2) conditions, $F(2, 122) = 6.756, p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

As predicted, a subtle form of sexist language significantly affected raters' social perceptions. Perhaps most noteworthy is the finding that sex-biased wording of a rather mild sort affected subjects' perception of the attractiveness or employment in psychology for women. This effect was in a sex-role related direction: Generic masculine nouns and pronouns were associated with decreases in the assumed attractiveness of a psychological career for females, relative to either nonsexist condition. If representative, the implications of this phenomenon are clear: The use of generic masculine nouns and pronouns in written texts may selectively proscribe female interest in subjects they might otherwise seek out. If Blaubergs (1978) is correct, this effect would occur most often for female sex-role violations, such as seeking traditionally male employment. One can only assume that more blatant types of sexist language would have an even greater impact upon perceptions and interests, as indicated by Bem and Bem (1973) and Brannon (Note 2).

Interestingly, when male nouns and pronouns were replaced with "she or he" and neutral nouns, male subjects were less willing to refer a male friend to a psychologist, while female subjects revealed the greatest willingness to do so under this condition. It is suggested that the sociopolitical implications of subtle differences in "generic" indicators were not lost on the subjects. A change from generic masculine parts of speech to a neutral form which presented female pronouns first was apparently powerful enough to dampen male interest in referring a male friend to a psychologist. Perhaps these male subjects found psychology more threatening when it was described in vaguely female terms, resulting in less willingness to refer a fellow male. It is not clear why female subjects were not correspondingly reassured by this "femaleness" and did not become more willing to refer female friends under the "she or he" condition. Lewis (1976), however, has noted that because of the socially defined com-

petence assigned to the male role, female clients often indicate less confidence in female psychotherapists. Finally, the finding of greater female willingness to refer a male friend to a psychologist described by "she or he" is open to various interpretations. Perhaps by exposing their male friends to an implicitly female therapist, these women were attempting to invoke a form of male consciousness raising. Alternatively, female subjects may have assumed that a female therapist would best provide the support and nurturance stereotypically expected of women in the presence of troubled men (Kaplan, 1979).

Regardless of their interpretation, data from the present study suggest that even subtle forms of sexist language in written text can directly affect sex-role related perceptions of the content being described. This effect is assumed to be a function of a literal interpretation of "generic" masculine nouns and pronouns, as suggested by Moulton et al. (1978). Yet a great number of textbooks, journals, and other written materials continue to use masculine nouns and pronouns to denote members of either sex. On this basis alone, a case could be made for the likelihood of unwitting promotion of sex bias in certain academic and public settings. At the very least, recent demands for nonsexist language in journals and other publications appear supportable on the grounds of an empirical relationship between sexist language and sex-biased perceptions.

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