

1991

# A Computer Program to Teach Nonsexist Language

Mark R. McMinn

*George Fox University*, [mmcminn@georgefox.edu](mailto:mmcminn@georgefox.edu)

James D. Foster

*George Fox University*, [jfoster@georgefox.edu](mailto:jfoster@georgefox.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac)



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

McMinn, Mark R. and Foster, James D., "A Computer Program to Teach Nonsexist Language" (1991). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. Paper 107.

[http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp\\_fac/107](http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac/107)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Clinical Psychology at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

# A Computer Program to Teach Nonsexist Language

Mark R. McMinn  
James D. Foster  
*George Fox College*

*A computer program designed to teach nonsexist language is described. The interactive program teaches students to recognize the various forms of sexist language described in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA, 1983) and to correct sexist language without mixing singular and plural pronouns. Student performance records are saved to a disk file for later review by the instructor. In a preliminary study with general psychology students, the software was as effective in teaching nonsexist language as was a didactic presentation on the topic and was more effective than no presentation.*

Psychologists' concern about reinforcing sexism through sexist language is evidenced by APA policies, publication guidelines, and research recommendations (see Denmark, Russo, Frieze, & Sechzer, 1988). Since 1982, all APA journals have required nonsexist language for submitted manuscripts.

Beginning college students may be insensitive to the implications of sexist language; college students appear to develop more inclusive perceptions of women as their education progresses (Etaugh & Spandikow, 1981). Because previous research indicates that sexist language affects college students' perceptions of sex roles (Benoit & Shell, 1985; Briere & Lanktree, 1983; Dayhoff, 1983; McMinn, Lindsay, Hannum, & Troyer, in press), it seems ethically important to include some discussion of sexist language in undergraduate psychology courses.

Unfortunately, some students correct sexist language by creating grammatically unacceptable alternatives. For example, the sexist sentence, "When a surgeon prepares for surgery, he must adhere to sterile procedures," might be revised by some students, "When a surgeon prepares for surgery, they must adhere to sterile procedures." Although

the revision avoids sexist language, it incorrectly combines singular and plural pronouns.

The computer program described herein was developed to teach students to recognize the problem of sexist language and to use nonsexist language without losing proper sentence structure. The program was written in compiled BASIC for the Macintosh computer and requires at least 512k RAM. Because the material presented in the program is stored in a text file on disk, the content can be edited or customized by using a word processor. The program is organized into five units.

## Program Structure

In the sensitizing unit, students are asked to complete sentences (e.g., "A witch is a . . ."). Eight of the 16 sentences contain masculine words, such as *landlord*, *gentleman*, *sir*, and *master*, and 8 sentences contain parallel feminine words, such as *landlady*, *lady*, *ma'am*, and *mistress*. After a student completes the 16 sentences, responses are summarized on the screen, with responses to feminine and masculine forms in separate columns. Students not knowing the purpose of the program are often surprised to see the different assumptions they make about masculine and feminine forms of similar words. This part of the program is designed to demonstrate the sometimes subtle nature of sexism in language and to introduce the problem to students.

In sentence identification, students are given a series of five sentences and asked in each case if the sentence contains sexist language. Some sentences are similar to those in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 1983) and others come from publications ad-

vocating the use of nonsexist language (Pearson, 1985; Stratton, 1987). The sentences are:

1. Mothers who caution their daughters never to leave the house without a dime or two to call home may be packing them off with pockets full of change once full deregulation of pay telephones reaches Michigan.
2. The search for knowledge has led us into ways of learning that bear examination.
3. HEADLINE: "Von Bulow's Mistress Testifies Against Him."
4. The college basketball program has been plagued with many injuries; fortunately, no one on the women's team has been hurt yet.
5. Committee chairpersons must be careful not to voice their opinions too quickly in order to get full discussion from other committee members.

Sentence 1 contains sexist language because it implies only mothers are concerned for their daughters and only daughters need to be protected. Sentence 3 contains sexist language because it describes a woman's identity in relation to a man. Sentence 4 contains sexist language because it implies that women's basketball needs to be sex-specified and that men's basketball is the main basketball program. After each of the five sentences, students are informed why their responses were correct or incorrect.

In the word identification unit, students are shown a sentence containing sexist language and are required to move the computer mouse to the sexist word(s). If they incorrectly identify a word, the computer requires them to keep trying until they choose the sexist word. After the student identifies the sexist part of the sentence, the computer shows an alternative revision that avoids sexist language. Part 3 consists of 10 such sentences. One example is: "Research scientists often neglect their wives and children." In this case, the student is required to point the mouse at the word *wives* because the correct way of stating this is: "Research scientists often neglect their spouses and children."

In the grammatical identification unit, the problem of mixing singular and plural pronouns is described and students are shown sentences in which singular and plural pronouns are incorrectly used. They must again point the computer mouse to the problematic word(s) in the sentence. After students correctly identify the problem, the computer again shows a revision. There are five of these sentences in Part 4, such as "When a person loses money, they should report the loss to the police." In this case, students must point the mouse either at *person* (singular) or *they* (plural), because a correct revision would not mix the plural and singular.

The final unit, sentence composition, involves typing grammatically correct nonsexist sentences at the keyboard. The computer gives a sentence with sexist language and the student types a correct sentence. For example, the computer prompts with "Learned helplessness has been observed in monkeys, dogs, fish, and men." A correct revision would require *men* to be changed to *humans*. Students' sentences are saved to a disk file for later review by the instructor.

After completing the program, students can get a printed copy of their results. The results include the descriptors used in Part 1, the number of correctly identified sentences in

Part 2, the mistakes made in identifying sexist language and grammatical problems in Parts 3 and 4, and the sentences constructed in Part 5.

## Recommended Uses

The software is useful as a teaching tool to sensitize introductory students to the problem of sexist language. One advantage of computer methodology is that students can assess their own awareness of the issue before hearing their professor's opinions. By having students complete the exercise in a campus computer lab before a classroom discussion on sexist language, they are able to understand their preconceptions and tendency to make sexist assumptions. After completing the computer exercise, students are willing to discuss the social issues that shape and are affected by sexist language. The resulting classroom discussions are lively. In my experience, a minority of students often need to convince the others that sexist language is a problem because many see it as a trivial concern.

The program can also be used in research methods courses and other courses that emphasize writing. Because APA journals require nonsexist language and because of the ethical implications of sexist language, psychology students need to avoid sexist language or assumptions in all their writing.

## Preliminary Research

In a preliminary study with general psychology students, the software was as effective in teaching nonsexist language as was a didactic presentation on the topic and was more effective than no presentation. Participants in the study were 57 women and 48 men recruited from introductory psychology classes at George Fox College. Because there were three stages to the study during a 2-month period, several of the participants were not present for each phase. Between 69 and 75 participants were included in the final analyses, depending on which statistical methods were used and how missing data were handled.

In the pretest, students were asked to write a paragraph in response to the following questions:

1. A business executive discovers a long-time employee has been stealing from the company. What should the executive do first?
2. A nurse discovers a hospital patient has been given blood contaminated with the AIDS virus. What should the nurse do first?
3. A professor discovers a student has cheated on an exam. What should the professor do first?

The responses were evaluated for the presence of sexist language. The scorer was one of two people who had obtained an interrater reliability of 1 in a previous study using the same question format.

During the intervention phase, half of the participants were presented information about sexist language and half received information about other ethical issues in psychology. The second dependent variable was the manner of presentation. Half of those receiving information about sexist

language attended a lecture on the topic, and the other half completed the computer program described earlier. Similarly, half of the control group attended a lecture, and the other half performed a computer exercise related to ethics (McMinn, 1988).

The posttest was given during the class following the intervention. Students were asked to write paragraphs in response to the same three questions that were on the pretest. Their responses were again evaluated for use of sexist language.

Posttest use of sexist language was evaluated using a  $2 \times 2$  analysis of variance with Content of Presentation (experimental vs. control) and Method of Presentation (lecture vs. computer) as factors. The dependent variables were dichotomous, whether or not participants used sexist language in their responses to each of the three questions on the sexist language questionnaire. There was a main effect for the Content of Presentation on use of sexist language in response to the question about a professor who caught a student cheating,  $F(1, 66) = 5.10, p < .05$ . Thirty-five percent (13 of 37 participants) in the experimental group and 64% (21 of 33) in the control group used sexist language to describe the professor. An unpaired  $t$  test demonstrated that the differences in sexist language use were not present in the pretest for the same question,  $t(75) = .288$ . In the pretest, 44% of the experimental group (18 of 41) and 47% of the control group (17 of 36) used sexist language to describe the professor. No main effects for Method of Presentation and no interaction effects were found.

Effects of language training were found, but only for responses to the essay question about the professor's response to a cheating student. Students may be able to apply the use of nonsexist language only to stereotypes that have been weakened by their own experiences. Most of the participants have limited exposure to nurses and business executives, but they often see male and female college professors. Thus, they can apply their training in nonsexist language when confronted with a gender-neutral character, but may not be able to break down stereotypes of male business executives and female nurses.

Training in nonsexist language, either by brief lecture or interactive computer assignment, has a modest effect on college students' use of sexist language. A more powerful intervention, such as grading an assignment on nonsexist language or combining computer instruction with classroom lecture and discussion, may be more effective. Additional

research should determine how best to teach students to avoid sexist language and assumptions.

Although these results suggest the difficulty of changing college students' use of sexist language, students report enjoying the computer program and seem to recognize the social problem of sexist language as a result. This program can be used as a tool in preparing students to understand the ethical complexities of using language.

## References

- American Psychological Association. (1983). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Benoit, S. S., & Shell, W. (1985). Can sex-biased communication affect business students' career decisions? *Delta Pi Epsilon Journal*, 28, 123-129.
- Briere, J., & Lanktree, C. (1983). Sex-role related effects of sex bias in language. *Sex Roles*, 9, 625-632.
- Dayhoff, S. A. (1983). Sexist language and person perception: Evaluation of candidates from newspaper articles. *Sex Roles*, 9, 527-539.
- Denmark, F., Russo, N. F., Frieze, I. H., & Sechzer, J. A. (1988). Guidelines for avoiding sexism in psychological research. *American Psychologist*, 43, 582-585.
- Etaugh, C., & Spandikow, D. B. (1981). Changing attitudes toward women: A longitudinal study of college students. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 5, 591-594.
- McMinn, M. R. (1988). Ethics case-study simulation: A generic tool for psychology teachers. *Teaching of Psychology*, 15, 100-101.
- McMinn, M. R., Lindsay, S., Hannum, L. E., & Troyer, P. K. (in press). Does sexist language reflect personal characteristics? *Sex Roles*.
- Pearson, J. C. (1985). *Gender and communication*. Dubuque, IA: Brown.
- Stratton, M. R. (1987, July/August). Weeding out bias. *Currents*, pp. 47-51.

## Notes

1. Readers who request the software should send \$5.00 to cover cost of duplication and postage.
2. Requests for reprints should be sent to Mark R. McMinn, Department of Psychology, George Fox College, Newberg, OR 97132.