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We investigated whether or not sexist language in written form can be linked to traditional views of sex roles, assertiveness, psychological androgyny, Christian beliefs, or sexist language in oral form. In Experiment 1, undergraduates were given an essay designed to test written sexist language and several pencil-and-paper personality inventories. No relationship between sexist language and interpersonal assertiveness or psychological androgyny was found. However, those who avoided sexist language were less traditional in their sex role perceptions scored lower on a scale of Christian beliefs. In Experient 2, the method of measuring sexist language was expanded by using three essay responses and a brief oral interview. Those who used sexist language in written form were more likely than others to use sexist language in oral form on some responses. Interpretations and implications of the findings are discussed.

Psychologists have been concerned about subtly transmitting sexism through sexist language for over a decade. The American Psychological Association (APA) adopted guidelines for nonsexist language in 1977 and all APA journals have required nonsexist language for submitted manuscripts since 1982.

Although this study investigated the use of gender-specific pronouns, the sexist language problem is much broader than pronoun use. For example, Stratton (1987) noted sexist language in a Detroit newspaper:

> Mothers who cautioned their daughters to never 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. (p. 48)

This language is sexist because it implies only daughters need to be cautioned and only mothers do the cautioning. The same message could be communicated without sexist language by referring to parents and children. Another headline Stratton (1987) identifies is "Von Bulow's Mistress Testifies Against Him." This is sexist because it identifies a woman in relation to a man. A third example can be seen in the passage "The college basketball program has been plagued with many injuries. Fortunately, no one on the women's team has been hurt yet." This is sexist because it assumes the primary basketball program is the men's program and places the women's program as secondary. These examples illustrate that the sexist language problem is both subtle and wide ranging.

Although sexist language is much broader than gender-specific pronoun usage, the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (3rd ed.; 1983) identifies gender-specific pronoun usage as a kind of sexist language. The empirical data is meager, but the limited evidence available suggests that sexist pronoun usage affects the response of those reading or hearing the language. Briere and Lanktree (1983) reported that undergraduates exposed to a passage about psychology with sexist pronoun usage were less likely to rate psychology as an attractive profession for women than those reading the same passage with nonsexist language. More generally, Benoit and Shell (1985) reported that sex-biased language about various occupations limits career choices for undergraduate students. Dayhoff (1983) reported that undergraduates more negatively rated women running for an office when the position was described with sexist pronouns.

Whereas most agree that passages using sexist language affect the way a reader interprets the passage, it is less clear whether those who spontaneously use sexist language do so because of certain sex role perceptions or personality characteristics. If language both reflects and shapes thought as Whorf (1956) suggested, sexist language presumably reflects certain ideological perspectives. It is also possible that those using gender-specific pronouns are no more sexist than others, but have uncritically accepted conventional language use without considering the social issues involved. In either case, we hypothesized that those using sexist language would have more traditional views of sex roles. Also, since Christian beliefs have often been used to support traditional sex role perceptions, we hypothesized that those using sexist language would report more fundamentalist Christian beliefs.

Another question not addressed by previous research is the relationship between oral and written sexist language. Are those who spontaneously use sexist language in written form more likely than others to use sexist language in oral form? We hypothesized a positive correlation between these two measures of sexist language.

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Participants. Those participating in the study were 26 females and 16 males recruited from an undergraduate psychology class at a liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest. Students received extra credit for participating in the study. Seven of the students did not participate in both phases of the study, leaving a final pool of 35 participants.

Procedure. Early in the semester students were asked to respond to the following question:

> A business executive discovers a long-time employee has been stealing from the company. What should the executive do first?

Participants wrote a brief response to the question, which was then rated by two of the authors for amount of sexist pronoun use. The two raters achieved an interrater reliability of 1.00 in an identical task of a subsequent part of the study, so only one rater's evaluations were used for the analyses.

Approximately two weeks later, participants completed a number of pencil-and-paper questionnaires including the Role Orientation Scale of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (Snyder, 1981), a short form of the Interpersonal Behavior Survey (Mauger & Adkinson, 1980), which measures aggressiveness and assertiveness, the Bem Androgyny Scale (Bem, 1974), and The Shepherd Scale—a measure of Christian beliefs (Basset, Sadler, Kobischen, Skiff, Merrill, Atwater, & Livermore, 1981). These self-report measures were given to see if attitudes toward sex roles or personal assertiveness might be related to use of sexist language.

Results

Of the 35 participants, 25 used one or more sexist pronouns in responding to the essay question. The other 10 avoided using sexist language. This classification was used as the independent variable and the results on the pencil-and-paper tests were the dependent variables.

As hypothesized, those who used sexist language in written form were more traditional in their sex role perceptions [$t(32) = 1.853$, $p < .05$, one tailed]. Also as hypothesized, those avoiding sexist language reported less adherence to fundamentalist Christian beliefs than others [$t(32) = 1.922$, $p < .05$, one tailed].

The use or nonuse of sexist language did not differentiate between scores on the other dependent variables. Those who avoided sexist language in the

written passage were no more likely to see themselves as more or less assertive, aggressive, or psychologically androgynous than those who used sexist language.

Discussion

In our college student sample, we have no evidence that use of written sexist language is related to interpersonal behavior or personality characteristics. However, it does appear to be related to ideological issues such as religious faith and sex role perceptions. Those who are more progressive in sex role perceptions are also more cautious not to use sexist language. These participants may have been the minority that had been previously sensitized to issues of sexism. Alternatively, those who used sexist language may not have had sexist attitudes, but perhaps had uncritically accepted the social norm of sexist pronoun use. Those who were more sensitive to sex role equality were also those who had thought critically about the problem of sexist language in perpetuating sexist attitudes and beliefs.

Christian fundamentalist values have often been used to perpetuate sexist views of women (Bolsinger & McMinn, 1989). Piper (1989), a Christian writer, suggests,

> My definition of the heart of feminity includes three words to describe the response of a woman to the strength and leadership of worthy men: affirm, receive and nurture. (p. 37)

Not all Christians view women in this way, but our results suggest that those using sexist language tend to be more fundamentalistic in their Christian beliefs. Ironically, the essence of Christian beliefs call for social justice and world concern, but those who hold to those beliefs most rigidly may be less sensitive to issues of sexism than others. As mentioned earlier, this may be because they uncritically accept the traditions common within the Christian subculture (e.g., traditional view of women, predominant presence of men in leadership positions) without challenging stereotypical worldviews. It should also be noted that our participants came from a college with a Christian affiliation and that most students scored relatively high on the Christian beliefs measure. Even the group avoiding sexist language scored substantially higher than a group of those considering themselves non-Christians (Bassett et al., 1981).

Another variable of interest for future study is to investigate how ideological changes throughout college affect sexist language use. College students develop more inclusive perceptions of women as their education progresses (Etaugh & Spandikow, 1981), so one might predict that their use of sexist language would decrease also. This was not tested in the present

study since the participants were mostly first-year students in an introductory psychology course.

This first experiment did not address the question of whether those using sexist language in written form are more likely to use sexist language in an oral interview.

EXPERIMENT 2

Methods

Participants. Those participating in this study were 57 female and 48 male students recruited from introductory psychology classes at a liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest. Because there were two stages to the study extending over a two-week time interval, several of the participants were not present for both phases. Thirty-two males and 39 females were included in the analyses.

Procedure. We expanded our method of testing sexist language use. Rather than just asking the question about the business executive, we also asked a question about a nurse and a question about a professor. The questions are listed below:

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?

Early in the semester participants wrote responses to the three questions listed above. The questions were listed on a single page with the heading, "Ethics Questionnaire." The responses were reviewed by the same two raters who recorded the number of sexist pronouns used in Experiment 1. The interrater reliability was 1.00 so only one rater's results were used in the analyses.

In phase two, participants were interviewed individually and asked the following questions:

1. A truck driver has just witnessed a pedestrian being hit by a car. What should the truck driver do first?

2. A librarian notices that many students are being too loud in the library. What should the librarian do first?

3. A robber pulls a gun on a bank teller. What should the bank teller do first?

4. A nurse discovers a hospital patient has been given blood contaminated with the AIDS virus. What should the nurse do first?

Their responses were tape recorded and two raters listened independently to the recordings. Each rated the number of sexist pronoun uses, resulting in an interrater reliability of .90.

Results

Of the 71 students participating in the study, only 11 − 8 women and 3 men − avoided sexist language in all three of the essays. Twenty avoided sexist language during the four interview questions. Since one question was identical on the written and oral tests, a correlation coefficient was computed using a dichotomous (0 = no sexist language; 1 = sexist language) distribution for each variable ($r = -.143$). Thus, there appeared no global relationship between those avoiding sexist language in written form and those avoiding sexist language during the interview. However, by looking more specifically at responses to individual questions, some interesting findings emerged.

Figure 1 shows the number of sexist pronouns used in response to each of the interview questions by those using and not using sexist language in the written essays. Although those avoiding sexist language in written essays tended to use less sexist language in oral form, the differences were statistically significant only for the question about a bank teller. In response to this question, none of those avoiding sexist language in writing used sexist language orally.

Because so few participants avoided sexist language in written form, a split was created where those who used sexist language zero or one time during the essays comprised one group, and those who used sexist language more than once comprised the other. This use of sexist language factor was crossed with the sex of the participants in a 2 × 2 analysis of variance and oral question responses were used as dependent variables.

Those with low use of sexist language used fewer sexist pronouns in response to the first interview question about a truckdriver [$F(1,67) = 8.806$; $p < .01$]. No other main effects for use of sexist language were found. Males responded with more sexist language in response to the fourth interview question about a nurse [$F(1,67) = 3.847$; $p = .05$]. No other main effects for sex were found. No interaction effects were found.

Discussion

Although it is not a consistent finding across all questions, it appears that those using sexist language in response to the written questions were
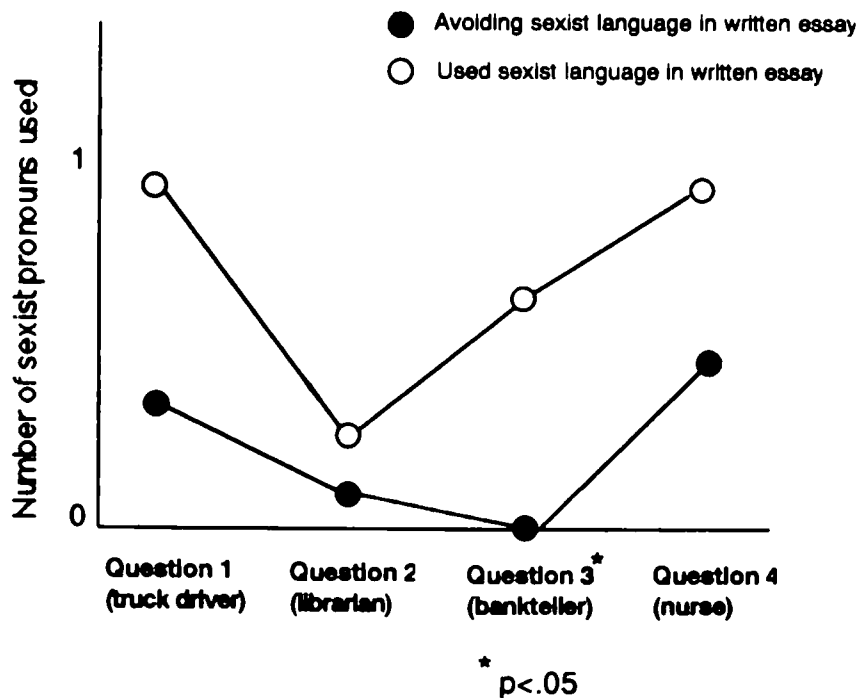
Fig. 1. The average number of sexist pronouns used in response to each interview qeustion for those who avoided or did not avoid sexist language in written form.

more likely than others to use sexist language in oral form in response to some of the interview questions.

Only a small number avoided sexist language in written form altogether. This indicates relative insensitivity to issues of sexist language among introductory college students. However, those who did avoid sexist language in written form were less likely to use sexist language in oral form, at least for the question regarding a bank teller. They did not differ significantly in response to other interview questions. This may be because assumptions about the sex of truck drivers and nurses are more powerful than assumptions about bank tellers — too powerful for those avoiding written sexist language to overcome. The assumptions about the sex of librarians may be quite weak since neither group used much sexist language in response to the second interview question.

When those with low-frequency use of sexist language are compared with those of high-frequency use, they differ only in response to the oral question about a truck driver. Surprisingly, the differences with response to the bank teller disappear. Males and females differed on sexist language use only in response to the question about a nurse. The men in this study made stronger assumptions than the women about nurses being female. Moreover, men were more likely to use sexist pronouns in response to this question than either men or women were in response to other questions.

It appears that connections between written and oral sexist language are weak. Because these connections are tenuous, the findings are difficult to interpret. More research in this area needs to be focused on the specific

connections between sexist assumptions and sexist language use in written and oral form. The question of whether or not a person uses sexist language may be too broad. Rather, the question may be more accurately viewed as, "Who uses sexist language under which specific conditions and in response to which assumptions?"

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