1991

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Recommended Citation

McMin, Mark R.; Troyer, Pamela K.; Hannum, Laurel E.; and Foster, James D., "Teaching Nonsexist Language to College Students" (1991). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. Paper 81.
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac/81

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Teaching Nonsexist Language to College Students

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ABSTRACT. Although psychologists have noted the importance of avoiding sexist language because of its potential role in transmitting sexism, little attention has been given to methods of teaching students of psychology to use nonsexist language. Two experiments were conducted to measure the effectiveness of teaching general psychology students to use nonsexist language. In a pilot study (Experiment 1), undergraduates were exposed to a 20-minute lecture either on use of nonsexist language (experimental group) or on an unrelated topic (control group). No changes in use of sexist language in short essay responses were noted on the posttest or in a 2-week follow-up. In Experiment 2, the method of measuring sexist language was expanded by using three essay responses, and the procedure was repeated except that a second independent variable was added: Students were instructed either in lecture format or with an interactive computer program. The method of presentation showed no effect, but the group receiving training about nonsexist language used less sexist language on one of the three essay questions. 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. In fact, psychologists' concerns about perpetuating sexism is broadening beyond language. These concerns are evidenced by the report from the ad hoc committee on nonsexist research, which was adopted by the APA Council of Representatives in 1988 and published in *American Psychologist* (Denmark, Russo, Frieze, & Sechzer, 1988).

College students in general psychology classes tend to be less concerned than psychologists about using nonsexist language. This may be especially true of beginning college students because college students appear to

develop more inclusive perceptions of women as their education progresses (Etaugh & Spandikow, 1981). Thus, many psychologists feel an ethical and didactic responsibility to emphasize the importance of using nonsexist language to introductory students.

Others have noted the importance of using nonsexist language in writing and speaking. Briere and Lanktree (1983) reported that undergraduates exposed to a sexist passage about psychology 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 language.

Although the importance of teaching undergraduates the use of nonsexist language is becoming clear, it is less clear what teaching methods will effectively accomplish the task. Adamsky (1981) found that she could change college students' use of generic male pronouns by teaching classes using "she" as the generic singular. However, using female generic pronouns is perceived as sexist by many and violates the APA standard of nonsexist language use. Moreover, Salter, Weider-Hatfield, and Rubin (1983) found that using a generic "she" pronoun negatively affects speaker credibility, especially male speakers.

We were interested in knowing the effect of a brief didactic presentation on nonsexist language in changing language use among general psychology students. We hypothesized that those instructed on how to avoid sexist language would use less sexist language in a brief writing assignment than would those receiving a control presentation on a topic unrelated to the use of nonsexist language.

EXPERIMENT 1: PILOT STUDY

Method

Participants in the study were 26 women and 16 men recruited from an undergraduate general psychology class at George Fox College. Because the study extended over several months, 16 of the students did not participate in the entire study, leaving a final pool of 26 participants, 13 in the experimental condition and 13 in the control condition.

In a pretest, given early in the semester, students were asked to respond to the following question, written on the chalkboard: A business executive discovers a long-time employee has been stealing from the company. What should the executive do first?

Participants were not told the purpose of the study. They were 5 given minutes to write a brief response to the question, which was then rated by two of the authors for amount of sexist pronoun use, the dependent variable in subsequent analyses. Whenever the response used a singular masculine pronoun, reflecting the assumption that the question referred to a male business executive, it was scored as a use of sexist language. There were no instances of responses assuming the business executive was female. Because the two raters achieved an interrater reliability of 1.00 for an identical task on a later part of the study, only one rater's evaluations were used for the analyses.

Halfway through the semester, students were randomly assigned to one of two groups. The experimental group received a 20-minute presentation on the use of nonsexist language. The content of the presentation was taken from the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (3rd edition). The presentation was made by two of the authors, both women, who later presented the control group with a message about ethical issues pertaining to deception in psychological research. Presentations were made to groups of approximately 20 students each and were of equal lengths.

A posttest was conducted 2 days later during the next class session. Students were given the same question, again written on the chalkboard, about a business executive and were given 5 minutes to write a brief response. Finally, a 2-week follow-up trial was given using the same question and the same scoring format.

Results

A split-plot ANOVA was used to analyze results, the between-groups factor being the message participants received and the repeated measures factor being the three tests of language usage. No significant differences in use of sexist language were found between groups, $F < 1.00$, and no reduction in sexist language use was found with time, $F < 1.00$. Moreover, the expected interaction between message condition and sexist language use over time was not found, $F(2, 48) = 1.089, p > .05$.

Discussion

There were no significant changes in sexist language use by giving a 20-minute oral presentation on the topic. The presenters noticed that some participants in the study were vocal in their resistance to using nonsexist language, complaining that it would be too cumbersome to write "his or her" as an alternative to generic male pronouns. It is also possible, however, that our measure of sexist language did not detect whatever

changes may have resulted from the presentation. Experiment 2 broadened the method of measuring sexist language use.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

Subjects

Those participating in the study were 57 women and 48 men recruited from introductory general psychology classes at George Fox College. Because there were three stages to the study extending over a 2-month interval, 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 being used and how missing data were handled.

Procedure

As with the pilot study, participants were pretested for sexist language, then given information about nonsexist language, then posttested to see what changes occurred. The 2-week follow-up phase from the pilot study was eliminated because we were no longer concerned with how long changes in language use would last; rather, we were interested in whether or not we could produce any changes.

We also 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?

During the first week of the semester, participants wrote paragraph responses to the three questions. The questions were listed on a single paper with the heading "Ethics Questionnaire." Participants were given approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaires and were not informed about the purpose of the research until after the posttest. The responses were reviewed by two raters (the same as in Experiment 1) who scored the number of sexist pronouns used. Because the interrater reliability was 1.00, only one rater's results were used in the analyses.

In the second phase, participants were exposed to a presentation about sexist language or a presentation about some unrelated ethical issue in psychology. However, a second independent variable was added. Half of the participants received their presentation in oral form from the same two presenters used in the pilot study, and half of the participants received the message via computer-aided instruction. This variable was added to see if computers could be used to teach skills of nonsexist language. The two independent variables resulted in four groups. The computer experimental group participated in individualized computer-aided instruction by using a program developed by one of the authors to teach the use of nonsexist language (McMinn & Foster, in press). The program describes the problem of sexist language and then gives participants opportunities to identify and correct sexist language imbedded in a variety of sentences. The computer control group participated in a computerized ethics simulation exercise on IBM computers that includes no discussion of sexist language (McMinn, 1988). The lecture experimental group attended an oral presentation on sexist language similar to the one described in the pilot study. The lecture control group attended an oral presentation on the use of deception in psychological research similar to the one used for the pilot study.

During the class period following the intervention, participants again completed the questionnaire designed to measure sexist language, using the same testing method as before. Their responses were again evaluated by two raters, producing an interrater reliability of 1.00.

Results

Posttest use of sexist language was evaluated using a 2×2 ANOVA with content of presentation (experimental vs. control) and method of presentation (lecture or 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. We used dichotomous scoring because we did not want to assume that the number of times sexist language was used directly corresponded to sexism. For example, it seems unreasonable to assume a person using three sexist pronouns is three times as sexist as a person using one sexist pronoun.

As in the pilot study, the question referring to a business executive showed no change as a result of the experimental manipulation. Similarly, the question referring to the nurse showed no change. However, there was a main effect for the content of the presentation on use of sexist language in response to the question about a professor who caught a student cheating, $F(1, 66) = 5.098, p < .05$. Thirty-five percent (13 of 37 participants) in the experimental group used sexist language to describe the professor, and 64% (21 of 33 participants) in the control group used sexist language. An un-

paired t test demonstrated that the differences in sexist language use were not present in the pretest for the same question, $t(75) = .288, p > .5$. On 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. Figure 1 shows the percentage using sexist language on each of the three questions before and after the experimental intervention. No main effects for method of presentation were found and no interaction effects were found. When the sex of participant was added as an ANOVA factor, the $2 \times 2 \times 2$ design had three of the eight cells with fewer than 10 participants, limiting the generalizability of the analysis. No main effects for sex of respondent or method of presentation were found, and no interaction effects were found, but there remained a main effect for content of presentation on the question regarding a college professor, $F(1, 62) = 4.757, p < .05$.

Discussion

The question asked in the pilot study was whether or not the use of nonsexist language could be effectively taught to general psychology students in a brief oral presentation. No effects were demonstrated, but the results of Experiment 2 suggest that measuring sexist language only with one situation, the business executive, may have been the problem in the first study. Effects of language training were seen in Experiment 2 but only for responses to one of the three essay questions—the one pertaining to a college professor's response to a cheating student. Responses to the question about a business executive showed no change in Experiments 1 or 2.

There are at least two possible explanations for this finding. First, it may be that students are only able to apply the use of nonsexist language to stereotypes that have been weakened by their own experiences. Most of the participants have limited exposure to nurses and business executives, but they are exposed to male and female college professors on a daily basis. Thus, they can apply their training in nonsexist language when confronted with a gender neutral character. But they do not appear able to break down stereotypes of male business executives and female nurses.

Second, because the third question asked about a student cheating, a problem they have all heard and thought about, they may have approached that question with more caution or thoughtfulness than the other two. By thoughtfully responding to the third question they might have been more aware of specific language choices.

In either case, it appears that 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 power intervention might have a stronger effect that can be generalized to stronger stereotypes. We are in

FIGURE 1. The percentage of participants using sexist language on each of the three questions before and after the presentation on nonsexist language.

the process of conducting more experiments to test the effects of various intervention strategies.

A general conclusion from this study is that changing sexist language among college students is not easily done. Many students have had 20 years of thinking and speaking in sexist ways, and those behaviors appear not to be easily changed. One professor, in a brief presentation, is unlikely to produce the desired changes in language use. Ultimately, this will need to be an issue discussed across college and university curricula so that students will learn to think and write in nonsexist ways because of the repetitive emphasis in many of their classes.

Another implication for academic instruction is that professors would do well to break down powerful stereotypes in using classroom examples. Using a male pronoun when referring to a nurse might productively dis-equilibrate students' stereotypes and cause them to think critically about sex-role assumptions. Our 20-minute presentation had little or no effect on the most powerful sex-role stereotypes. These stereotypes will probably break down only after frequent reminders and examples that contradict the stereotypic data.

We should note that not all researchers have concluded that male pronouns lead to sexist assumptions. For example, Cole, Hill, and Dayley (1983) conducted a series of studies and concluded that male pronouns alone are not convincingly related to images of males. Nonetheless, most experimental studies and theoretical articles on the topic appear to point the other direction, indicating a link between sexist language and sexism (see McMinn, Lindsay, Hannum, & Troyer, in press). The negative effects of sexist language may be especially salient on a sociological level. If language both reflects and shapes thought, as Whorf (Carroll, 1956) suggested, sexist language presumably has a social effect on the way sex roles are perceived and transmitted from one generation to another.

An important caution in interpreting these results is the distinction between sexist language and sexist thinking. Although sexist language may be a subtle contributor to sexist thinking, correcting sexist language will not solve the problem.

Issues of sexism go beyond the direct teaching of nonsexist language in the classroom. For example, Bertilson, Springer, and Fierke (1982) reported evidence that college textbooks use nouns and pronouns to imply male referents more commonly than female referents. Developing effective ways to teach nonsexist language in the classroom is only a part of the task we are facing.

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