INTRODUCTION

Does it matter what words we use to describe and label people? Feminist writers have argued that it does matter (see for example Lakoff, 1975). Their argument is that words do not just reflect our beliefs and attitudes, but actually play a part in forming and reinforcing those beliefs and attitudes. The use of the pronouns 'he', 'him' and 'his', for example, to refer to people (both women and men) is more than just a neutral, unimportant grammatical convention. It has the effect of putting men implicitly at the centre of anything that is spoken about, whilst 'backgrounding' women. The effect is subtle, but pervasive and powerful. Nowadays most social scientific publications require writers to use non-gender specific pronouns when referring to people.

The experiment summarised here was designed to investigate whether or not these kinds of subtle effects of language could be demonstrated empirically. Specifically, it set out to examine whether people's attitudes to an adult female could be affected by her being described either as a 'girl' or as a 'woman'. Should the tendency to describe adult women as 'girls' be seen as endearing and harmless? Or is there something more important and problematic going on when people do this?

THE STUDY

The study involved subjects choosing which of two candidates was the more suitable for a hypothetical job. Each candidate was presented to the subjects by means of a reference which had apparently been written by their previous employer. One of the references referred to the candidate as a 'girl' and the other referred to her as a 'woman'. The subjects actually performed this task twice; once for a low-status job, and once for a high-status job. Kitto's hypothesis was that the candidates referred to as girls would be more likely to be thought suitable for the low-status job, and the candidates referred to as women would be more likely to be nominated as suitable for the high-status job.
Subjects

Sixty-four subjects participated, 32 women and 32 men. No further details of subjects are given.

Design

This experiment used a two-condition repeated measures design. The independent variable was the term used to describe the candidate ('girl' or 'woman'); the dependent variable was measured by means of the subjects' judgements of the candidates' suitability for the particular jobs.

Procedure

Each subject received two job advertisements. One was for a high-status job ('personal assistant for top executive'), the other for a low-status job ('helper/server in a café'). With each advertisement were references, ostensibly written by a former employer, for two candidates. For each job, one of the candidates was referred to as a 'girl', the other as a 'woman'. All four references were matched in terms of the personal qualities and abilities that were described for each candidate, the extent and relevance of the candidates' previous experience, and their age (all were 25). Each reference appeared an equal number of times in each of the two conditions; that is, for half the subjects reference 'A' referred to the candidate as a girl, and for the other half of the subjects reference 'A' referred to the candidate as a woman.

Each subject was required to choose, for each of the two jobs, which of the two candidates they thought was more suitable. The order in which the subjects made these decisions was randomised, so that some saw the high-status job advertisement and references first, and some saw the low-status job advertisement and references first. Subjects were also asked to give reasons for their decisions.

Results

Note that the measures in Table 8.1 are 'dependent'. In effect each subject appears in two cells in the table, so the chi-square test of homogeneity is not a suitable inferential statistic in this instance. Kitto reports using a McNemar matched samples test (a chi-square test for dependent samples) to show a statistically significant difference in subjects' choices in the high-status job condition, in favour of 'woman' ($p < .001$).