Sex-Role Related Effects of Sex Bias in Language

John Briere and Cheryl Lanktree

University of Manitoba

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.

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. Correspondence may be sent to either author at the University of Manitoba, Department of Psychology, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3T 2N2.
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