Does Gendered Language Have an Effect on You?
Angella M. Valencia & Alexandra I. Zelin, PhD

Background & Purpose

- Promoting gender equality has never been more relevant and important in today’s society. Language can be seen as a mirror of social structures (Matheson & Kristiansen, 1987).
- In the English language there is gendered language that is exclusive for males (e.g. he, him), exclusive for females (e.g. she, her), and gendered-neutral language (e.g. you, them).
- Often people use gender-exclusive language and gendered-pronouns (he or she), yet refer to an opposite gender or gender-neutral description (e.g., fireman vs. firefighter).
- Stout and Dasgupta (2011) argue that even when exclusive language (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000) is used, negative effects of individuals who experience gender-exclusive language (using she/he, respectively), and male-inclusive/exclusive language (using he/she, respectively), and gendered-neutral language (it or they).
- Ostracism can either be intentional or unintentional and depends largely on the perception of the receiver (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). The danger with ostracism is that it threatens the four fundamental needs of humans: belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence.
- Discrimination can be understood as a larger sociological component that includes ostracism (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000) and emphasizes negative differences in various out-groups.
- Women have been ostracized, rejected, and discriminated against. Many discriminatory stereotypes are associated with being a woman: [only good at being] mothers, less reliable, less promotable, and severe wage inequality (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009).
- Researchers further demonstrate the impact of gender-exclusive language; for example, people perceive women to have a lack of fit when applying for an open position and during job interviews when gender-exclusive language had been used (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011).
- Campbell and Roberts (2007) showed that when women used stereotypical language associated with females, they received poor employment reviews compared to the other male and female applicants for the job who did not use stereotypically-feminine language. This example shows how female-exclusive language can lead to disadvantages as well as feelings of non-identification and ostracism.

Abstract

The aim of this study is to evaluate how the perceptions of gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive language in job advertisements affects participants decisions to apply for a job. Language, specifically the use of pronouns, can be a form of social exclusion. Gender-exclusive language uses one-gendered-pronoun (he or she), yet may also mean to refer to someone of the opposite gender or to describe both genders. By conducting a replication study of Stout and Dasgupta (2011), we wish to study the effects of gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive language in job advertisements on both men and women.

This study will evaluate how men’s and women’s perception of gender-exclusive versus gender-inclusive language by means of job advertisements affects their decision to apply for a job. We believe that the differences in pronouns used in our job advertisements will affect feelings of social exclusion from the particular company.

Method

Participants who have completed a pre-screen survey on SONA were randomly assigned into one of three different conditions based on the job description: female-inclusive/exclusive language (using she/he, respectively), and male-inclusive/exclusive language (using he/she, respectively), and gendered-neutral language (it or they).

Participants reviewed a portion of a job advertisement. The specific job title and KSAs were not included so personal job interests did not affect perceptions of the organization. Instead, participants read information describing the organization’s culture, which used either gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive language. After reading the job advertisement, participants answered various questions relating to the job ad via Qualtrics.

We measured participants’ perceptions of how strongly they would feel ostracized, motivated, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and overall emotions if they worked for the company in the job ad. We also measured self-identification and gender identity. Participants were debriefed after the conclusion of the experiment.

Results

The results presented here are preliminary as we are continuing to collect data until the end of the Fall 2018 semester.

No significant interaction was found between Job Description (neutral, male, female) and gender (man/woman) in relation to perceptions of future Job Satisfaction.

Future Direction

- The goal of this study is to provide a closer look at how males and females perceive gender-exclusive language compared to gender-inclusive language in a job and provide further research in the area of employee recruitment.
- We will continue collecting data throughout Fall 2018.
- We expect to find a significant two-way interaction in which women will identify less with a gender-exclusive job advertisement.
- Replicating the findings from Stout and Dasgupta’s (2011) study would provide further indication of how harmful gender-exclusive can be for recruitment of diverse applicants.
- Organizations can use the results of this study to evaluate current organizational communications for gender-inclusive language, inducing for job descriptions and interdepartmental memos.

References