

Relationships with Females and Attitudes Towards Sexist Language

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Abstract

This study aims to find a relationship between female influence on one's life and that individual's attitude toward sexist language. The literature documents conflicting opinions about politically correct language. Those in support of inclusive language argue that sexist or offensive language has larger social implications that affect the population, and it should be removed from everyday speech. Specifically, that superiors in work environments who allow sexist language give the impression that this language is a signal that sexist actions are also acceptable. On the other hand, opponents of language change state that exclusive language is used when there is a strong discriminatory feeling, and changing the word in question does not combat the problem. Also, free speech is threatened when language is restricted. Studies also show that specific variables are telling of attitudes towards sexist language, including gender, work environment, and feminist identity. This study analyzed the influence of female relationships in their lives on subject's attitudes towards sexist language. Subjects completed a survey asking them questions about their relationships with females in order to calculate a composite score for the amount of female influence. Subjects then completed the *Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language-General Version* and a composite score was calculated that reflects the individual's attitude toward sexist language. When analyzed for a bivariate correlation, no significant relationship was found. It is suspected that there were several limitations of the study that may have influenced the results and future studies should take these into account when further searching for correlation between these two variables.

Relationships with Females and Attitudes Towards Sexist Language

Sexist language is a source of disagreement among many, as a consensus has not been reached about if this language is hurtful and further, if it should be removed from everyday

speech. As defined by Parks and Robertson (2004, p. 415), sexist language is defined as “words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males *or* exclude trivialize, or diminish either” gender. Sexist language is a subset of the politically correct language movement that has been studied and discussed with in great detail.

The politically correct language movement is extremely controversial, with strong beliefs about civil rights on both sides. Ben O’Neill (2011, p.279) describes the movement as an attempt at “reducing the social acceptability of using offensive terms and discouraging the reflexive use of words that import negative stereotypes, promoting a conscious thinking about how to describe others fairly on their merits”.

Contemporary society is filled with individuals who object to certain words or phrases, arguing that they are insensitive or offensive. In an article published in *Film Journal International*, Keith Widenkeller (2011) lists several phrases that should be removed from everyday speech, particularly in the workplace, including “retarded” and “rape and pillage”. Widenkeller uses the film *The King’s Speech* as a platform for his argument. In the film, the main character, King George VI of England, reflects on the importance of spoken word and how it influences those listening. Widenkeller states that words are tied to leadership, and those in work settings are modeling what a business or industry stands for. If workers use demeaning language, they are either purposefully or unintentionally stating what their employer believes or tolerates. By this logic, workers who use sexist language against women are showing women that this business accepts a culture of discrimination. Those who support the political correct movement would argue that employees would benefit from a culture where they are spoken about with respect and that businesses should lead society by taking a stance against offensive language. Others propose that some fear the fact that new voices and new groups are being

heard. Those who have been marginalized in the past are raising to positions where they can soundly argue against what they find offensive and the opponents of language change are frightened of this (Jenish, 1997).

Critics of politically correct language have strong opinions that language should be free to evolve naturally. They state that changing specific words or phrases does not target the actual problem behind discrimination. Ben O'Neill (2011) presents an argument that politically correct terminology is built by those who still want to use the terms in question. O'Neill says that the words themselves are not offensive but the "tone and delivery" or the intention of the speaker is what aims to offend. Individuals who say offensive things do it with the intention of taunting and making others ashamed of whatever characteristic the words target. With respect the word "retarded", the speaker intends to point out that an individual is slow or less competent, which is an blatant insult. O'Neill argues that replacing words will not solve the problem because the words that are found to be offensive evolve to the point where they are considered offensive. An example of a word that changed in meaning is "retarded" which was originally used as a way to describe someone or something slow, fitting to categorize someone with mental disabilities. But now has been used as a weapon by those who wish to put people down. Another argument is that the freedom of speech should be upheld, as a constitutional right for all citizens.

Universities across the country are facing challenges from students who are combating the political views of the faculty by saying their language choices need to be restricted. Jenish upholds the belief that professors are now being discriminated against. Professors are silenced or censored throughout their courses (Jenish, 1997).

The arguments for and against restricting offensive language are given by those who feel passionately about the topic. What qualities differentiate those on opposite sides of this

argument? A study done at Bowling Green State University found gender to be a mediating variable between attitudes towards women and attitudes toward sexist language, with females being more supportive of inclusive language (Parks & Robertson, 2004). Being a certain gender is correlated with feelings about sexist language, but there are other factors that influence these attitudes. Parks and Robertson have defined a separation of two different categories of these factors that could influence the attitudes toward sexist language as “person” variables (such as age and gender) and “contextual” variables (such as occupation, work environment, and social institutions). The researchers have speculated various cohort effects, suspecting that older generations, such as the Baby Boomers, are more reluctant to change than younger individuals, but have not conclusively found any significant relationships. They also suggested that further research could be done on group membership to certain political or social groups.

A contextual variable involved in attitudes towards feminism and feminist identity are family factors. As reported by Kara Wolff and Patrick Munley (2012) family environments that promote understanding the perspectives of others is correlated with feminist identities and understanding. Meaning that family members influence how individuals characterize themselves as females and how they relate to females. Wolff and Munley do not distinguish the influence of mothers, sisters, grandmothers, or aunts, nor state how the influence is different, based on the type of relationship. It is hypothesized that spending more time with females would expose an individual to sexism, through an influential person in their life. Microaggressions, such as sexist language, may be more visible when someone spends substantial time with the target of these aggressions.

I hypothesize that a contextual variable that has an effect on attitudes toward sexist language is the amount of female influence that one has in their life. I expect that the more

relationship one has with females, the more likely they are to notice and define language as sexist.

Method

Participants accessed the survey that was developed for this research online, through Qualtrics Survey Software, either on their personal computers or mobile devices. They read a statement about the study, giving information about the use of the results, stating that responses are anonymous, and that participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time. They were required to affirm their consent to participate before beginning the survey.

Participants

Participants were a sample of 18-79 year old individuals ($N=106$) that were recruited through email and Facebook. Majority of the participants live in the midwestern region of the United State. Both genders were represented with 22.64% being male and 76.42% being female, furthermore, 1 subject preferred not to state their gender.

Female Influence Survey

They were asked 7 questions about their relationships with females (including their relationship status, family members, etc.). For each of these questions, a composite score was calculated to determine a total female influence score ranging from 0-7, with 0 meaning the individual has no female influence in the specified areas and 7 meaning the individual has a female influence in all the specified area. Each variable is coded for equally, without more emphasis placed on any specific variable.

Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language-General Version

The Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language-General Version (IASNL-G) was completed next. This survey is strictly meant to analyze the thoughts and beliefs the participants have towards sexist language. The 21-item inventory asks about willingness to change language such as using “*flight attendant* instead of *steward* or *stewardess*” or if they find “worrying about sexist language” to be “trivial”. The items are measured on a Likert-scale with a 5 being favoring nonsexist language and 1 being “resistant to language reform” (Parks, Robertson 2004). Total scores for IASNL-G range from 21-105. Scores that range from 105-73.6 are considered as reflecting an inclusive attitude toward language, between 73.5-52.6 are neutral attitudes, and 52.5-21 reflect negative attitudes.

The participants were also given the option to share a situation in which they saw or experienced sexist language and how they felt about the situation. This was an open-ended question in which participants could tell their experience with sexist language in as many or as few words as they wanted. This question, unlike the others, did not require an answer in order to submit the survey

Results

Composite scores for female influence and IASNL-G were analyzed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for a bivariate correlation, as shown in Table 1. No significant relationship was found between the composite score for female influence and the composite score for the IASNL-G, as indicated by a coefficient of $r=.017$, which is not significant at $p<.05$.

A regression analysis was also run between each individual variable for the female influence with the gender of the participant being Female Influence 1 (FI1) the relationship status

of the participant being Female Influence 2 (FI2), the presence of a female guardian during the majority of the participant's life being Female Influence 3 (FI3), the participant having sisters being Female Influence (FI4), the participant having daughters being Female Influence 5 (FI5), the participant having female members of their extended family that they regularly spend time with being Female Influence 6 (FI6), and the participant having at least one female in their close circle of friends being Female Influence (FI7). Each of these variables are binomial, and the participant answered either yes or no. None of the predictor variables resulted in significant relationships.

Table 1

Linear Regression Analysis for Female Influence Variables

<u>Model</u>	Extended Family: FI6	-.199
Constant	Female Friends: FI7	-.037
Gender: FI1	t	.336
Relationship Status: FI2	.496	-.383
Female Guardian: FI3	2.926	<u>Sig.</u>
Sisters: FI4	-.369	.640
Daughters: FI5	.332	.004

.713	.843	.737
.741	.970	.7

Discussion

A general assumption cannot be made, based solely on the data from this study, that the influence of females does not affect or is not correlated with attitudes towards sexist language. There are several potential limiting factors that may have influenced the results in this study.

First, the measurement for female influence was very crude. Each question about female influence was either answered with a “yes” or “no”, which does not accurately reflect the amount of influence that a female may have had on this participant. The female guardian living in the house may have worked many hours and not been around the participant during their developmental years. Also, having one sister may not have the same amount of influence as having five sisters, yet they were coded the same way. Additionally, it was assumed that each variable equally influenced the participant, when having daughters may have more of an influence than having a female friend or having females in one’s extended family. Finally, there was no way to assess if the relationship or influence of the female was positive or negative. One participant may have some females in their life that have positively influenced them, while others may have been detrimental to their well-being, yet they were also coded for the same value.

Another limitation of this study was the restriction of strong or deeply offensive language that may be emotionally-charged, in order to avoid violation of the guidelines of the International Review Board. The setting of this study did not allow the use of words that may cause defensive

reactions. Subjects may have deemed the microaggressions presented in the inventory to be too mild to oppose. They may have not seen a purpose in disagreeing with word choices that are simply discriminatory in the fact that they are unnecessarily distinguishing between men and women. Colloquially, sexist language is described as words or phrases that are offensive to women and aim to harm them, such as “whore” and “bitch”, which were not used in this study. A study that uses words that participants are likely to find harmful to women may result in more participants labeling language as sexist.

As is standard with the surveying technique, the results are dependent on self-reporting responses and memory of the participants. Those taking the survey may have not considered the question carefully before selecting an answer. There also was a disproportionately high number of females taking this survey, compared to males. This discrepancy did not allow for a large enough sample to study gender as a separate variable. It may be possible that males and females react to the influence of females or understand sexist language differently.

Notably, 33 of the participants elected to share a story of a time when they experienced sexist language. Of these responses, 32 participants stated that they have been hurt by sexist language. While this does not result in a conclusive or quantifiable measurement, it illustrates that many participants feel passionately enough about this subject to share their story and how they have been hurt. Empathy and goodwill are at stake when a group of the population feels that they are systematically being targeted based on their gender or any other external factor.

Further studies should consider refining the composite score for female influence in order to more accurately calculate how influential females are on an individual. Stronger language that is more likely to cause a divide in ideologies may result in significance. Finally, a more equally

divided sample of males and females should be found so gender can be analyzed as an additional independent variable.

Appendix

Female Influence Survey

Scoring

Items are scored either 0, for no female in that category or 1, for a female in that category. Composite scores are calculated by adding scores together for items 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 10, for a range from 0 to 7, with 0 meaning no female influence and 7 being extensive female influence. Items 4,7, and 9 are not calculated in the composite score. For item 1, “male” and “prefer not to say” should be given a score of 0 and “female” should be given a score of 1. For item 2, “in a relationship with a male” and “single” should be given a score of 0 and “female” should be given a score of 1. All other responses should be given a 0 for “no” responses and 1 for “yes” responses.

Female Influence Survey

1. What is your gender?
Male
Female
Prefer not to say
2. What is your relationship status?
In a relationship with a male
In a relationship with a female

Single

3. Please answer with respect to the majority of your childhood and adolescence: Did you grow up with a female guardian living in your house?

Yes

No

4. Please answer with respect to the majority of your childhood and adolescence: Did you have a pet living in your house?

5. Do you have any sisters (including biological, step, half, and adopted)?

Yes

No

6. Do you have any daughters (including biological, step, half, and adopted)?

Yes

No

7. Please answer with respect to the majority of your childhood and adolescence: Did you enjoy playing sports?

Yes

Moderately

No

8. Please answer with respect to the majority of your childhood and adolescence: Did you regularly spend time with female members of your extended family?

Yes

No

9. As a child, did you play with dolls?

Yes

No

10. Do you have at least one female in your close circle of friends?

Yes

No

Inventory of Attitudes Towards Sexist/Nonsexist Language-General

Scoring

All items are scored on a Likert-type scale with 5 options. Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, and 10 are reverse coded, and must be reversed before calculating a composite score. Responses from 5-4 signify a positive attitude toward inclusive language; a score of 3 signifies a neutral attitude, and 2-1 indicate a negative attitude. Composite scores range from 105-21, positive attitudes are represented by scores from 105-73.5, neutral attitudes are between 73.5, and negative attitudes are between 52.5-21 (Parks and Robertson, 2000).

Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language-General

Please use the following definition in completing this questionnaire: Sexist language includes words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males or exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender.

SECTION I: For each of the following expressions, choose the descriptor that most closely corresponds with your beliefs about language.

1 strongly disagree; 2 tend to disagree; 3 undecided; 4 tend to agree; 5 strongly agree

1. Women who think that being called a “chairman” is sexist are misinterpreting the word “chairman.”
2. We should not change the way the English language has traditionally been written and spoken.
3. Worrying about sexist language is a trivial activity.
4. If the original meaning of the word “he” was “person,” we should continue to use “he” to refer to both males and females today.
5. When people use the term “man and wife,” the expression is not sexist if the users don’t mean it to be.
6. The English language will never be changed because it is too deeply ingrained in the culture.
7. The elimination of sexist language is an important goal.
8. Most publication guidelines require newspaper writers to avoid using ethnic and racial slurs. So, these guidelines should also require writers to avoid sexist language.
9. Sexist language is related to sexist treatment of people in society.

10. When teachers talk about the history of the United States, they should change expressions, such as “our forefathers,” to expressions that include women.
11. Teachers who require students to use nonsexist language are unfairly forcing their political views upon their students.
12. Although change is difficult, we still should try to eliminate sexist language.

SECTION II: Are the underlined words and phrases in the following sentences sexist?

1 not at all sexist; 2 probably not sexist; 3 undecided; 4 somewhat sexist; 5 definitely sexist

13. People should care about all mankind, not just themselves.
14. The belief that frogs will give you warts is just an old wives’ tale.
15. If a child wants to play the piano well, he must practice hard.
16. Alice Jones should be chairman of our committee.

SECTION III: Choose the descriptor that most closely describes you in the following situations.

1 very unwilling; 2 reluctant; 3 undecided; 4 somewhat willing; 5 very willing

17. When you are referring to a married woman, how willing are you to use the title “Ms. Smith” rather than “Mrs. Smith”?
18. How willing are you to use the word “server” rather than “waiter” or “waitress”? 19. How willing are you to use the expression “husband and wife” rather than “man and wife”?
20. How willing are you to use the term “camera operator” rather than “cameraman”? 21. How willing are you to use the title “flight attendant” instead of “steward” or “stewardess”?

Reminder: Sexist language includes words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males or exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender.

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