
Essay

Why Sexist Language Matters

Sherryl Kleinman¹

For eleven years I've been teaching a sociology course at the University of North Carolina on gender inequality. I cover such topics as the wage gap, the "second shift" (the disproportionate amount of housework and child care that heterosexual women do at home), the equation of women's worth with physical attractiveness, the sexualizing of women in the media, lack of reproductive rights for women (especially poor women), sexual harassment, and men's violence against women. But the issue that both female and male students have the most trouble understanding—or, as I see it, share a strong unwillingness to understand—is sexist language.

I'm not referring to such words as "bitch," "whore," and "slut." What I focus on instead are words that most people consider just fine: male (so-called) generics. Some of these words refer to persons occupying a position: postman, chairman, freshman, congressman, fireman. Other words refer to the entire universe of human beings: "mankind" or "he." Then we've got manpower, man-made lakes, and "Oh, man, where did I leave my keys?" There's "manning" the tables in a country where we learn that "all men are created equal."

The most insidious, from my observations, is the popular expression "you guys." People like to tell me it's a regional term. But I've heard it in Chapel Hill, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Montreal. I've seen it in print in national magazines, newsletters, and books. I've heard it on television and in films. And even if it were regional, that doesn't make it right. I bet we can all think of a lot of practices in our home regions we'd like to get rid of.

Try making up a female-based generic, such as "freshwoman," and using it with a group of male students, or calling your male boss "chairwoman." Then again, don't. There could be serious consequences for referring to a man as a woman—a term that still means "lesser" in our society. If not, why do men get so upset at the idea of being called women?

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What's the big deal? Why does all this "man-ning" and "guys-ing" deserve a place on my list of items of gender inequality?

The answer is because male-based generics are another indicator—and, more importantly, a *reinforcer*—of a system in which "man" in the abstract and men in the flesh are privileged over women. Some say that language merely reflects reality and so we should ignore our words and work on changing the unequal gender arrangements that are reflected in our language. Well, yes, in part.

It's no accident that "man" is the anchor in our language and "woman" is not. And of course we should make social change all over the place. But the words we use can also reinforce current realities when they are sexist (or racist or heterosexist). Words are the tools of thought. We can use words to maintain the status quo or to think in new ways—which in turn creates the possibility of a new *reality*. It makes a difference if I think of myself as a "girl" or a "woman"; it makes a difference if we talk about "Negroes" or "African Americans." Do we want a truly inclusive language or one that just pretends?

For a moment, imagine a world—as the philosopher Douglas R. Hofstadter did in his 1986 satire on sexist language—where people used generics based on race rather than gender. In that world, people would use "freshwhite," "chairwhite," and, yes, "you whiteys." People of color would hear "all whites are created equal"—and be expected to feel included. In an addendum to his article, Hofstadter says that he wrote "A Person Paper on Purity in Language" to shock readers: Only by substituting "white" for "man" does it become easy to see the pervasiveness of male-based generics and to recognize that using "man" for all human beings is wrong. Yet, women are expected to feel flattered by "freshman," "chairman," and "you guys."

And why do so many women cling to "freshman," "chairman," and "you guys?"

I think it's because women want to be included in the term that refers to the higher-status group: men. But while being labeled "one of the guys" might make women *feel* included, it's only a guise of inclusion, not the reality. If women were really included we wouldn't have to disappear into the word "guys."

At the same time that women in my classes throw around "you guys"—even here in the southern United States, where "y'all" is an alternative—they call themselves "girls." I'm not sure if this has gotten worse over the years or I've just noticed it more. When I was an undergraduate in the early to mid 1970s, we wanted to be women. Who would take us seriously at college or at work if we were "girls?" To many of my students today, "woman" is old enough to be "over the hill." A "girl" is youthful and thus more attractive to men than a "woman." Since they like the term so much, I suggest that we rename Women's Studies "Girls' Studies." And since the Women's Center on campus provides services for them, why not call it "The Girls' Center." They laugh. "Girls" sounds ridiculous, they say. The students begin to see that "girl"—as a label for twenty-one-year-olds—is infantilizing, not flattering.

“Girl” and “you guys” aren’t the only linguistic problems on campus. A few years ago Bob, a student in my class, said that his fraternity is now open to women as well as men and that a controversy had erupted over whether to continue to use the term “brother” to refer to all fraternity members, or to use “sister” for female members. Almost all the women in his fraternity, he said, voted to be called brother rather than sister. As with “you guys,” the women wanted to take on the word that has more value. Yet the practice of using “brother” reinforces the idea that a real member of the group is a brother (i.e., a man). I asked what would happen if he had suggested that all fraternity members be called sisters rather than brothers, or that they rename the fraternity a sorority. Everyone laughed at the absurdity of this suggestion. Exactly. Yet it is not absurd, but acceptable, to call women by the term “guys” or “brothers.”

Since the “fraternity” Bob referred to is no longer exclusively male, and since gender is no longer a criterion for membership, I asked him how he thought others might react if he suggested they substitute “association” or “society” for “fraternity.” Perhaps they could call both men and women “members,” or, if students preferred a more informal term, “friends?”

“Yes, that makes sense,” Bob told us. “But, I just don’t think they’ll go for it.” He paused. “I’m not sure why.”

We talked as a class about why this simple solution might meet with resistance. We concluded that many men would resist losing these linguistic signifiers of male superiority, and many women would resist losing the valued maleness implied by “brother” and “fraternity.” “Member” would feel like a drop in status for both women and men!

The students, like most people who use male “generics,” don’t have bad intentions. But as sociologists, we know that it’s important to look at the *consequences*. All those “man” words—said many times a day by millions of people every day—cumulatively reinforce the message that men are the standard and that women should be subsumed by the male category.

I worry about what people with the best of intentions are teaching our children. A colleague’s five-year-old daughter recently left her classroom crying after a teacher said, “What do you guys think?” She thought the teacher didn’t care about what *she* thought. When the teacher told her that of course she was included, her tears stopped. But what was the lesson? She learned that her opinion as a girl mattered only when she’s a guy. She learned that men are the norm.

A friend’s six-year-old son refused to believe that the female firefighter who came to his school to talk to the class—dressed in uniform—actually fought fires. The firefighter repeatedly referred to herself as a “fireman.” Despite the protests of the teacher and the firefighter, the boy would not be convinced. “A *fireman* can’t be a woman,” he said. His mother, who is fastidious in her use of nonsexist language, had a tough time doing damage control.

So, is it any surprise that the worst insult a boy can hurl at another boy is “girl?”

We know from history that making a group invisible makes it easier for the powerful to do what they want with members of that group. Perhaps that's why linguists use the strong language of "symbolic annihilation" to refer to the disappearance of women into male-based terms. And we know, from too many past and current studies, that far too many men are doing "what they want" with women. Most of us can see a link between calling women "sluts" and "whores" and men's sexual violence against women. We need to recognize that making women linguistically a subset of man/men through terms like "mankind" and "guys" also makes women into objects. If we, as women, aren't worthy of such true generics as "first-year," "chair," or "you all," then how can we expect to be paid a "man's wage," be respected as people rather than objects (sexual or otherwise) on the job and at home, be treated as equals rather than servers or caretakers of others, be considered responsible enough to make our own decisions about reproduction, and define who and what we want as sexual beings? If we aren't even deserving of our place in humanity in language, why should we expect to be treated as decent human beings otherwise?

Some people tell me that making English nonsexist is a slippery slope. As one colleague said to me, "Soon we'll have to say 'waitperson,' which sounds awful. We won't be able to 'man' the table at Orientation. And we'll become 'fellowpersons' at the Institute!" I told him that "server" works well. We can "staff" the table. And why not use "scholars" instead of "fellows?" We've got a big language to roam in. Let's have fun figuring out how to speak and write without making "man" the center. If sliding down that slope takes us to a place where we speak nonsexist English, I'm ready for the ride.

And this doesn't mean that every word with "m-e-n" in it is a problem. Menstruation and mending are fine. Making amends is good, too. There's only a problem when "men," as part of a word, is meant to refer to everyone (freshmen, chairmen, and so on).

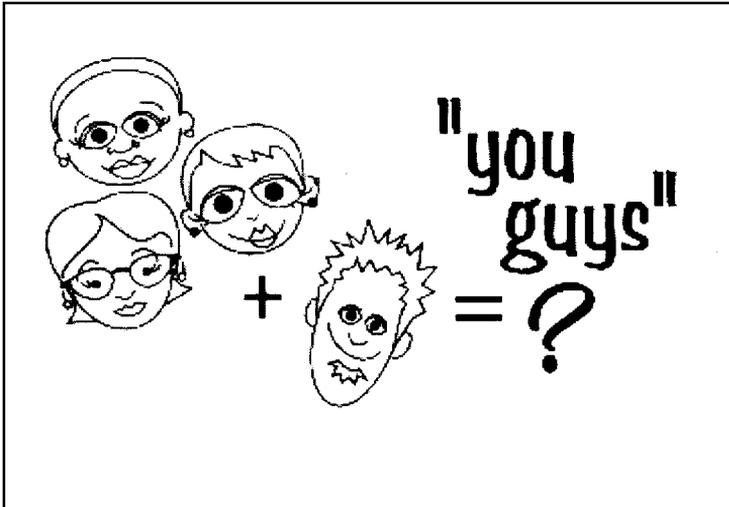
Now and then someone says that I should work on more important issues—like men's violence against women—rather than on "trivial" issues like language. Well, I work on lots of issues. But that's not the point. Working against sexist language *is* working against men's violence against women. It's one step. If we cringe at "freshwhite" and "you whiteys" and would protest such terms with loud voices, then why don't we work as hard at changing "freshman" and "you guys?" Don't women deserve it? That women primarily exist in language as "girls" (children), "sluts" (sex objects) and "guys" (a subset of men) makes it less of a surprise that we still have a long list of gendered inequalities to fix.

We've got to work on *every* item on the list. Language is one we can work on right now, if we're willing. It's easier to start saying "you all," "y'all" or "you folks" instead of "you guys" than to change the wage gap tomorrow.

And what might help us make changes in our language? About a year ago I was complaining, as usual, about the "you guys" problem. "What we need is a

card that explains why we don't want to be called guys!" Smita Varia, a veteran of my gender course, said. "Let's write one."

And so we did. Smita enlisted T. Christian Helms, another former student, to design a graphic for the card. You can access the layout of this business-sized card from our website: www.youall.freeservers.com. Make lots of copies. Give the



"Hey, You Guys!"

Imagine someone walking up to a group of guys and saying, "Hey, girls, how're ya doing?" We doubt they'd be amused! So isn't it weird that women are supposed to accept—even like—being called "one of the guys?" We're also supposed to like "freshman," "chairman" and "mankind."

Get over it, some people say. Those words are generic. They apply to everyone. But then how come so-called generics are always male?

What if generics ended in "white"? Freshwhite, chairwhite, and "hey, you whiteys!" Would people of color like being called "one of the whites?" We don't think so.

The terms "guys" makes women invisible by lumping them in with men. Let's quit doing that. When you're talking to a group of customers, gender doesn't really matter, so why not replace "you guys" with "you all," "folks," or "y'all." Or simply say "what can I get you?" That would take care of us all.

Thanks for your help.

cards to friends and ask them to think about sexist language. Leave one with a big tip after you've been "you guysed" during a meal. The card explains the problem and offers alternatives.

And institutional change is also possible. Some universities have adopted "first-year student" (instead of "freshman") because some students and faculty got angry about the male-based generics embedded in university documents. The American Psychological Association has a policy of using only inclusive language in their publications. Wherever you work or play, get together with other progressive people and suggest that your organization use "chair" instead of "chairman," "Ms." instead of "Mrs." or "Miss," "humankind" instead of "mankind," and "she or he" instead of "he." In my experience, members of some activist groups think sexist language is less important than other issues. But if we're going to work on social change, shouldn't we start by practicing nonsexist English among ourselves? Let's begin creating *now* the kind of society we want to live in later.

Nonsexist English is a resource we have at the tip of our tongues. Let's start using it.

REFERENCE

- Hofstadter, D. R. (1986). A person paper on purity in language. In D. R. Hofstadter, *Metamagical themas: A questing for the essence of mind and pattern* (pp. 159–167). New York: Bantam.

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