

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Our Androcentric Language \*

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Though about 52% of all humans are female, our society uses an **androcentric language**. In other words, our language is centered on the male ("andro-") portion of the population. Even if you are aware of this fact, you may not be aware of its significance.

This androcentric bias in English leads to a **linguistic sexism**. When we talk about "man" or "mankind" to refer to humans as a whole, we systematically exclude women. Since women and girls are the numerical majority, it would seem to make more sense to use "woman" or "womankind" when referring to the human race. Those who accept our current usage without question say that "man" is a generic term that includes women and girls along with men and boys. A similar argument is used for generic pronouns (he, his, him) that are supposed to do the same thing.

Unfortunately, these terms may or may not be viewed as generic, and they typically do not bring the picture of both males and females to mind. As an example, let us use this statement — *"Every student in the classroom did his best on the exam."* Does this statement give you the mental image of both men and women working hard on a test? Or do you see a room full of boys in an all-male class working on an exam?

Several studies investigated the use of the generic pronoun "he" in textbooks. In most cases, they found that the use of "he" was preceded by data that referred only to men — not to both men and women. In fact, many scientific studies that generalize to all humans are done only on men. This male bias is so extreme, that it even extends to research with animals. For example, *"virtually all of the animal-learning research on rats has been performed on male rats."* So even in supposedly objective sciences, this bias toward male subjects implies the view of the male-as-a-norm for all species. Women are seen as a deviation from this norm.

In another study, students were asked to find illustrations for a book with chapter titles like *"Industrial Man"* or *"Social Man"* in contrast to *"Industrial Life"* or *"Society."* Students were more likely to select all-male photographs to illustrate the first two titles, even though the use of "man" was intended to be generic.

All languages do not have this sex bias. A few — Aztec, Chinese, Finnish, Hungarian — have truly generic pronouns that refer to human beings without designating either sex.

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**Much of sexism is so ingrained in our language,  
that we don't even recognize it.**

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Even in English, there are ways to get around the sexism of generic masculine pronouns. In the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, specific suggestions are given to reduce sexism in our language. The main suggestion is to change from singular masculine pronouns (he, him, his) to plural ones (they, them, their) that are neither masculine nor feminine. Instead of the sample sentence I used in my third paragraph, we could say, "*All the students in the classroom did their best on the exam.*" Although some authors use the alternatives of "*his or her*" or "*his/her*," these become cumbersome if they are used often. (Even in these, notice how the male pronoun is always mentioned first? In my articles — instead of "*he/she*" — I use "*s/he*," because it is shorter and does not have the male pronoun first.)

Even the generic "*man*" as a part of larger words or phrases could be changed. Instead of using the term, "*mankind*," it is easy to substitute "*humanity*," "*human beings*," or even "*people*." Even a common term like "*manmade*" could be changed to "*artificial*" or "*synthetic*." Rather than trying to "*man a project*," you could "*staff a project*" or "*hire personnel*." Initially this may seem like a big effort, but it soon becomes second nature.

Lastly, unless it is necessary information, you do not need to designate the sex of an occupation — woman psychologist or male nurse. If you are quoting a qualified psychologist or nurse, should it make a difference if the information is coming from a man or woman?

A couple of decades ago, some people were upset because feminists preferred the title "*Ms.*" to either "*Mrs.*" or "*Miss.*" They did not understand what the fuss is about. Why should a woman's title change with her marital status, but a man's title stay the same? Doesn't this imply that a woman's place is in the home? If you don't think so, why doesn't a man's title ("*Mr.*") designate his marital status?

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\* Adapted from James Doyle and Michele Paludi's *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1991, pages 12-15, 215-219.