

2009

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WHEN HE DOESN'T MEAN YOU:  
GENDER-EXCLUSIVE LANGUAGE  
AS A FORM OF SUBTLE OSTRACISM

A Thesis Presented

by

JANE GAGE STOUT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

February 2009

Psychology

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## ABSTRACT

### WHEN HE DOESN'T MEAN YOU: GENDER-EXCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AS A FORM OF SUBTLE OSTRACISM

FEBRUARY 2009

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Two experiments examined the theorized link between the use of gender-exclusive language and ostracism. In two experiments, women and men read a job overview that contained either masculine gender-exclusive language (*he*), gender-inclusive language (*he or she*), or gender-neutral language (*one*). They then rated their feelings of exclusion (i.e., ostracism), described their personal investment in the described job (Experiments 1 and 2) and evaluated the work environment (Experiment 2). In both experiments, women reported feeling most ostracized when they were exposed to gender-exclusive language compared to gender-inclusive language. Furthermore, women in Experiment 1 reported least personal investment in the job when exposed to gender-exclusive versus –inclusive language, but this pattern of results did not replicate in Experiment 2. As expected, men did not respond differently to language type in either experiment. The divergence in women's responses between Experiments 1 and 2 are discussed in terms of the role that awareness of one's ostracized status might play in women's reactions to this form of subtle ostracism.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The need to belong is a fundamental social motive, the derivatives of which can be found in a wide range of everyday behaviors and emotional reactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals show a spontaneous tendency to affiliate with others as is evident in the attachment bonds that develop rapidly between infants and caregivers (Bowlby, 1969), social bonds that develop with others in close proximity (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950), ingroup preferences that emerge among individuals arbitrarily assigned to the same group (e.g., Tajfel, Flament, Billig & Bundy, 1971), and attachments among individuals whose only commonality is an aversive experience (Elder & Clipp, 1988). The need to affiliate with individuals and social groups is manifest in affective responses, both positive (Sternberg, 1986) and negative (Baumeister & Tice, 1990). When the need to belong is not met, feelings of loneliness and isolation may result and produce decreased immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser, Garner, Speicher, Penn, Holliday & Glaser, 1984), self-destructive behavior (e.g., eating disorders; Armstrong & Roth, 1989) and even suicide (Trout, 1980). Moreover, the desire to belong to one's ingroup and display group loyalty also motivates various antisocial behaviors such as cheating and lying (Geis & Moon, 1981) and the inhumane treatment of outgroup members (e.g., Ku Klux Klan atrocities; Wade, 1987). Together, these findings suggest that a sense of belonging is central to the human experience, and that when the motivation to belong is thwarted by social rejection or ostracism, it has wide-ranging negative effects on individuals. The present research examined ostracism at the intergroup level by assessing the consequences of social exclusion based on one's group



membership that is conveyed linguistically, through the use of gender-exclusive language.

### Ostracism

Over the past decade, there has been increasing interest in understanding the aversive nature of ostracism, rejection and social exclusion (see Williams, 2007 for a review). Ostracism refers to ignoring or excluding individuals or groups of individuals. This is distinct from rejection, which refers to an explicit declaration of dislike towards an individual. Williams (1997, 2001) proposed a model that describes the time course of people's reactions to being ostracized. Individuals first experience distress or psychological pain as a result of a threat to one of four core social needs (need for belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence), which in turn results in increased anger and sadness. Subsequently, individuals assess the situation in which the ostracism occurred, which, in conjunction with individual differences (e.g., rejection sensitivity), directs the type of coping mechanism they engage in order to recover from the psychological threat.

Ostracism has been experimentally manipulated through a variety of paradigms including being 'left out' during a ball-tossing game among a pair of confederates (Williams & Sommers, 1997), being excluded during an Internet-based ball-tossing game (Williams, Cheung & Choi, 2000, Experiment 1) and being ignored by a group of individuals during computer-mediated-communication (Williams Govan, Croker, Tynan, Cruikshank, & Lam, 2002). Other researchers have looked at responses to being ostracized by outgroup members (e.g., Mac versus PC users; Williams, Cheung & Choi, 2000, Experiment 2; also see Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007). Participants in all of these

studies responded to exclusion by way of depressed mood and deflated feelings of belonging, control, self-esteem and meaningful existence. These findings lend credence to Williams' (1997, 2001) model of ostracism in that the data confirm that ostracism leads to psychological distress, threatens core social needs, and arouses anger and sadness.

Research on coping responses to ostracism has found both approach behaviors and avoidance behaviors. As a case in point, Williams and Sommers (1997) led men and women to feel ostracized and later presented participants with a situation in which they could reinstate their sense of belonging among the individuals who had done the ostracizing. They found that ostracized women worked harder at a collective task alongside the ostracizing individuals than they did on an individual task whereas ostracized men engaged in social loafing during the collective task relative to the individual task. Other studies show that individuals sometimes also respond to social exclusion by aggressing against the ostracizing target (e.g., issuing louder and longer noise blasts; Twenge, Baumesiter, Tice, & Stucke, 2001) and by engaging in self-defeating behavior such as choosing to eat a fattening rather than a healthy snack (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002). Together, these studies illustrate that individuals engage in a variety of coping responses to deal with ostracism that are contingent on the social context as well as individual differences (e.g., one's sex). That these coping responses occur at all suggests that feeling ostracized leads to motivation to change one's behavior in order to regain one's non-threatened mental state prior to having been ostracized.

To date, research on ostracism has focused almost exclusively on feelings of exclusion due to ostracism directed towards a specific individual. Although some research has addressed people's responses to *incidental* ostracism by members of an outgroup (e.g., a PC user feeling ostracized by Mac users, Williams, Cheung & Choi, 1997), the ostracism literature has yet to examine the impact of being ostracized *because of one's group membership*. That is, research has yet to explore whether ostracism based on one's group membership results in the same aversive experiences as ostracism based on one's individual identity. I propose that this theoretical framework describing ostracism as an interpersonal phenomenon may be usefully applied to the group level to assess individuals' responses to exclusion based on group membership. One social phenomenon that falls within the category of group-based ostracism is gender-exclusive language--a type of subtly sexist language that makes reference to a single gender group thereby excluding the second gender group. The present research sought to synthesize research on ostracism and intergroup relations by examining whether gender-exclusive language results in group-based ostracism and influences women's feelings of inclusion and other affective and cognitive responses in the exclusionary environment. In so doing, the current work sought to expand the focus of ostracism research by testing the degree to which self-conceptions of individuals who belong to less advantaged groups are contingent on subtle ostracizing cues in the social environment.

#### Gender-exclusive Language as Group-level Ostracism

Past research has found that gender-exclusive language such as the use of masculine pronouns to refer to both men and women (e.g., the "universal" he) and masculine job titles (e.g., chairman, policeman) influenced listeners' attributions about

the sex of the individuals who occupy these jobs and the traits and behaviors attributed to them. Using masculine job titles (e.g., chairman) and pronouns as default descriptors of unknown individuals made perceivers think of men more than women (Gastil, 1990; Hamilton, 1988; Hyde, 1984; Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2002; Moulton, Robinson & Elias, 1978; Schneider & Hacker, 1973). Imagining men more than women in particular roles increased the attribution of masculine traits to individuals in those roles, which in turn elicited judgments of greater competence when perceivers found out that the occupier of the role was congruent with their assumption (a man) versus when that individual was incongruent with their assumption (a woman) (Dayoff, 1983; Hyde, 1984; McConnell & Fazio, 1996).

However, to date, little research has focused on the effect of gender-exclusive language on people's self-conceptions including feelings of exclusion. An exception lies in the work of Bem and Bem (1973) who found that real-life job advertisements explicitly targeted towards one sex (e.g., *Behind every man's telephone call, there is a woman. We need calm, coolheaded men with clear masculine voices...*) made members of the other sex less interested in pursuing the job. However, because this experiment was conducted more than 30 years ago using blatant sexist language which is frowned upon in contemporary society, it is unclear whether Bem and Bem's results would replicate today. Another experiment touching on the impact of sexist language on self-relevant cognitions (MacKay, 1980, Experiment 1) found that college-aged women who read a passage containing the "universal" *he* perceived the content of the passage as less personally relevant than when the passage contained the more gender-neutral *they*. In contrast, men regarded the text as more personally relevant when it contained the "universal" *he*

compared to *they*. However, MacKay was unable to replicate these findings in a second study. As is evident from this brief and dated summary, empirical research testing the ways in which gender exclusive language influences individuals' self-concept has been surprisingly neglected.

Thus, the primary goal of my research was to draw a theoretical link between ostracism and gender-exclusive language in order to elucidate the impact of such language on women's feelings of inclusion and their decisions about their own fit in a professional domain. Gender-exclusive language fits neatly into Williams' (2007) description of ostracism as "...being ignored and excluded, and it often occurs without excessive explanation or explicit negative attention" (p. 429). This type of language excludes specific gendered referents (e.g., An ideal student is one who sets goals for *himself*.), potentially making the excluded group member feel *ignored* and *excluded* from the social context. Further, gender-exclusive language is subtle and is unlikely to be experienced as an explicit attack against the excluded audience. That is, gender-exclusive language occurs *without explanation* and it may not require an *explicit expression of malicious intent* for it to have an aversive effect.

#### Overview of the Present Research

In order to examine the theoretical parallel between ostracism and the use of gender-exclusive language, Williams' (1997, 2001) theoretical model of ostracism was used as a conceptual guide for the present research. In the first experiment, men and women's interest and engagement in a professional setting were assessed based on whether the description had used either masculine gender-exclusive language (e.g., using *he* in the generic form to refer to both men and women) or gender-inclusive language

(e.g., *him or her*). A second experiment incorporated a gender-neutral condition (e.g., *one*) into the original design in order to gauge men and women's responses to gendered-language relative to a non-gendered language. In both experiments, it was expected that gender-exclusive language would lead to feelings of social exclusion and negative affect among women due to a threat to a core social need to belong. In order to cope with this threat, women were expected to psychologically withdraw from the situation. Together, these responses would map onto Williams' model, suggesting that gender-exclusive language is actually a form of ostracism.

## CHAPTER 2

### EXPERIMENT 1

Experiment 1 examined whether exposure to gender-biased language in a professional environment elicits feelings of ostracism among women and if this, in turn, evokes more negative affect about the workplace and disidentification from the job. These predictions were tested by subtly manipulating the way in which the job was described to make it sound gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive. In one condition, gender-exclusive language (e.g., We usually know a good employee when we see *him*) was used in the context of an employer seeking to convey an organization's work culture during a job interview. In a second condition, gender-inclusive language (e.g., *he or she*) was used to convey the same information.

I hypothesized that gender-exclusive language would lead women to feel more excluded, less motivated, less identified, and less likely to advance professionally in that work environment relative to women who were exposed to gender-inclusive language. I also expected women to evaluate the job description more negatively when it was described using gender-exclusive versus -inclusive language. The predicted direction of men's responses to gendered language was more unclear. On the one hand, it was possible that men would be unlikely to differ in their feelings of exclusion as a function of gendered language because both linguistic conditions included their ingroup, leading to no difference in their motivation, identification, perceived ability to advance professionally, or evaluation of the job description. On the other hand, it was also plausible that masculine gender-exclusive language may render a sense of privilege among men relative to gender-inclusive language, leading men to feel more motivated,

more identified with the job, more able to advance professionally, and more positive in their evaluation of the job description in the gender-exclusive than –inclusive condition. In sum, in Experiment 1, predictions about women’s responses to gender-exclusive versus –inclusive language were derived from an ostracism theoretical framework while predictions about men’s responses were exploratory.

## Method

### Participants

One-hundred-and-sixty-nine undergraduate participants (73 men and 96 women) volunteered in lieu of extra course credit. Four women and one man guessed the purpose of the experiment and were excluded from analyses, leaving a final sample of  $N = 164$  (72 men and 92 women) whose data were analyzed.

### Design

This experiment used a 2 Participant Sex (male vs. female) x 2 Language Type (gender-exclusive vs. gender-inclusive) between subjects design where the latter variable was manipulated between subjects.

### Manipulation and Measures

Manipulation of gendered pronouns in the job description. Two versions of a job overview and work environment description were created. The primary elements of the description included an emphasis on creativity and individual expression, a fast-paced work environment, fair distribution of employees’ workload, cognizance of competing organizations, and a reward system for superior work performance. One version (gender-exclusive condition) employed masculine referents (e.g., *he, him*) to describe current and prospective employees in the organization. There were a total of ten masculine



references. The second version (gender-inclusive condition) was identical to the first except that gender-inclusive language (e.g., *he or she*, *his or her*) was used in place of masculine referents. The following are examples of passages containing gender-exclusive language (italicized) and gender-inclusive language (bracketed) in the job description: “We want our *guys* [employees] to feel as though they have the ability to maneuver in terms of communicating their ideas”, “We think that when we come across an outstanding employee, rewarding *him* [him or her] will, in the end, boost the company’s overall productivity.” The job itself was left ambiguous so that the description was likely to appeal to a broad array of participants. See Appendix A for both versions of the description.

Ostracism measures. Four items, adapted from Williams, Cheung and Choi (2000), measured feelings of social exclusion. The following four items used a 7-point Likert type response scale ranging from “Not at all” (1) to “Very much so” (7): “To what extent do you feel that you would be ignored or excluded by your colleagues?”; “To what extent do you feel that you would be noticed or included by your colleagues?” [reverse coded]; “To what extent did you feel that you were being ignored or excluded by the staff person who described the job?”; “To what extent did you feel that you were noticed or included by the staff person who described the job?” [reverse coded]. This scale obtained an alpha coefficient of .81.

Evaluation of the writing style. Four items were adapted from Madson and Hessling (1999) to assess participants’ overall evaluation of the writer and writing style. They included: “The job description was enjoyable to read;” “The job description was easy to understand;” “The job description was well-written;” and “The writing style was

awkward in the job description” (reverse coded). These items used a 7-point Likert-type response scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (7). This scale obtained an alpha coefficient of .74.

Relevance of the job to the self-concept. In order to assess whether gender-biased language influences the degree to which participants envision themselves in that work environment, four items each measured motivation to pursue the job, perceived identification with the job, and perceived ability to advance professionally. Motivation was measured with the following questions: “If you were looking for a job, how interested would you be to apply for this job?”; “How motivated do you think that you would be in this work environment?”; “How much do you think that you would enjoy working in this work environment?”; “How likely would you be to think about your work outside of work hours because you want to, not because you are expected to?”. All response scales ranged from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (7). This scale obtained an alpha coefficient of .77.

Identification was assessed by asking participants the following questions: “How much personal satisfaction would you get out of your work if you were working in this environment?”; “How important would this job be to your self-concept?”; “To what extent would high performance at this job make you feel good about yourself?”; and “How much do you think that you would “fit in” in this work environment?”. All response scales ranged from “not at all” (1) to “very” (7). This scale obtained an alpha coefficient of .83.

Perceived opportunity for professional advancement were measured by asking participants the following questions: “If you were to take this job, how interested would

you be in pursuing a leadership role in the organization?"; "How difficult do you feel it would be for you to obtain a leadership role in this organization? [reverse coded]"; "How helpful do you think your colleagues would be in your effort to get ahead in this organization?"; "How likely would it be that your boss would provide you with mentorship to help you get ahead?". All response scales ranged from "not at all" (1) to "very" (7). This scale obtained an alpha coefficient of .44. Due to the low convergent validity of the items on this scale, participants' responses to this measure are not presented in the Results section.

Manipulation check. Four items assessed whether the job description was perceived to be gender biased and were used as a manipulation check. Three of these questions were to be rated using a 7-point Likert style scale: "Do you think that the writing style in the job description favored one gender over the other?" (1 = Favored women to 7 = Favored men); "Based on the job description, how "macho" would you estimate the work environment to be at this organization?" (1 = Not at all macho to 7 = Very macho); "In your opinion, was the job description's writing style sexist?" (1 = Not at all sexist to 7 = Very sexist). These questions obtained an alpha coefficient of .80. A fourth item asked participants to guess the sex of the staff person who had described the job.

### Procedure

When participants arrived at the lab they were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive). Participants were informed that the purpose of the experiment was to understand the types of jobs that appeal to college students like themselves. Participants were asked to imagine that they

were applying for work after graduating from college and to read the following instructions:

*Imagine that you are applying for work after you graduate from college. A medium-sized organization has advertised a position that happens to be relevant to your major. You have decided to look into this job and have set up an appointment with a staff member in order to learn a bit more about the organization. The staff member describes the job saying the following:*

Participants then read either the gender-exclusive or the gender-inclusive version of the description. Next, participants were given the following instructions:

*Now take a few minutes to imagine how you would feel in this situation. Think about the job that was just described and consider how you feel about applying for this job.*

Following these instructions, participants completed the five primary dependent variables, the first four occurring in counterbalanced order: (a) evaluation of the writing style, (b) motivation to apply, (c) identification with the job, and (d) perceived ability to advance professionally, which were followed by ratings of feeling excluded. After the primary dependent variables had been completed, participants completed the manipulation check questions. Participants were then debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## Results

### Manipulation Check

In order to test whether the language manipulation was effective, I conducted a Participant Sex x Language Type Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on the manipulation

check. I found a main effect for language type,  $F(1,160) = 37.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .19$ , such that participants in the gender-exclusive condition perceived the description to be more sexist ( $M = 4.78$ ) than the participants in the gender-inclusive condition ( $M = 3.62$ ). There was no main effect for Participant Sex ( $p = .11$ ) and no Participant Sex x Language Type interaction ( $p = .19$ ).

### Primary Dependent Measures

I hypothesized that women in the gender-exclusive condition would feel more excluded, less motivated, less identified with the job, and would evaluate the writing style more negatively than women in the gender-inclusive condition. As described earlier, men's responses were either expected to show no difference across the two conditions or to show more positive responses in the gender-exclusive versus -inclusive language condition. In order to assess the direction of women and men's responses to gendered language, I conducted a Participant Sex x Language Type ANOVA for each dependent measure (exclusion, motivation, identification, evaluation). For each analysis, I found a significant 2-way interaction, with the exception of job description evaluation, where the interaction was marginally significant. In all cases, the hypothesized direction of women's responses to language type was confirmed. With one exception, men did not differ in their responses to the outcome measures as a function of language type. The effects for each dependent measure are described in turn.

Ostracism. In testing feelings of exclusion, I found a significant Participant Sex x Language Type interaction,  $F(1,160) = 3.90$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$  (see Figure 1). As hypothesized, women felt significantly more excluded in the gender-exclusive condition ( $M = 3.87$ ) than in the gender-inclusive condition ( $M = 3.22$ ),  $t(90) = 2.49$ ,  $p = .02$ ,

Cohen's  $d = .52$ . However, men did not differ in their feelings of exclusion as a function of language condition ( $t < 1, p = .70$ ).

Motivation. I also found a significant two-way interaction for motivation,  $F(1,160) = 10.00, p < .01, \eta^2 = .06$  (see Figure 3). As hypothesized, women in the gender-exclusive condition were significantly less motivated ( $M = 4.68$ ) than were women in the gender-inclusive condition ( $M = 5.25$ ),  $t(90) = -2.38, p = .02$ , Cohen's  $d = .50$ .

Interestingly, men reported being *more* motivated in the gender-exclusive condition ( $M = 5.29$ ) than men in the gender-inclusive condition ( $M = 4.78$ ),  $t(70) = 2.16, p = .03$ , Cohen's  $d = .52$ .

Identification with the job. Finally, I found a significant two-way interaction for identification,  $F(1,160) = 5.13, p = .03, \eta^2 = .03$  (see Figure 4) where, as hypothesized, women identified less with the prospective job in the gender-exclusive condition ( $M = 4.90$ ) than did women in the gender-inclusive condition ( $M = 5.38$ ),  $t(90) = -2.09, p = .04$ , Cohen's  $d = .43$ . However, men did not differ in their identification ratings as a function of language type, ( $t(70) = 1.17, p = .25$ ).

Evaluation of writing style. A marginal Participant Sex x Language Type interaction for evaluation of the writing style yielded the same pattern that occurred for ostracism,  $F(1,160) = 3.56, p = .06, \eta^2 = .02$  (see Figure 2). That is, women in the gender-exclusive condition evaluated the job description less positively ( $M = 4.61$ ) than did women in the gender-inclusive condition ( $M = 5.19$ ),  $t(90) = -2.52, p = .01$ , Cohen's  $d = .53$ . Men did not differ in their evaluation of the writing style across language conditions ( $t < 1, p = .82$ ).

## Discussion

The findings of Experiment 1 yielded preliminary support for the proposed link between exposure to gender-exclusive language and feelings of ostracism among women. I found that when women were exposed to gender-exclusive language in a professional context, they reported feeling more excluded relative to women exposed to gender-inclusive language. Not surprisingly then, the former group of women also felt less job-based motivation, less identification with the prospective job, and evaluated the text more negatively relative to women exposed to gender-inclusive language. Men, however, did not differ in their feelings of exclusion, identification with the job, and evaluation of the writing style as a function of the type of language to which they were exposed. Interestingly, they did report more job-based motivation when the job was described using gender-exclusive versus gender-inclusive language.

These findings suggest that gender-exclusive language repelled women from the prospective work environment relative to their peers who experienced gender-inclusive language. Men, in most cases, did not respond differentially to the two types of language, with the exception of their reported motivation. However, a more appropriate comparison condition with regard to women and men's reactions to gendered language would be a gender-neutral language condition, which would function as a true control. Thus, a second experiment sought to replicate and extend the findings from Experiment 1 by incorporating a control condition as a reference point for men and women's responses to gendered language.

## CHAPTER 3

### EXPERIMENT 2

Because the previous experiment was the first of its kind to assess the ostracizing nature of gender-exclusive language for women, the primary goal of Experiment 2 was to replicate the predictions tested earlier with a control condition in place and a few additional methodological modifications. Specifically, six methodological changes were made in Experiment 2, although the same basic stimuli from Experiment 1 were used. First, Experiment 2 introduced a control condition that used gender-neutral language (e.g., *employee*) in order to have a baseline to which women and men's responses in the gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive conditions could be compared. Second, a less reactive measure was used to assess feelings of exclusion; this was designed to minimize the possibility that participants' responses might be influenced by demand characteristics. Third, the exclusion measure was issued *before* the remaining dependent measures in order to ensure that participants' responses on the exclusion questions obtained in Experiment 1 were not contaminated by their answers to the dependent variables that had been administered earlier. Fourth, in order to assess participants' evaluation of the work environment (rather than their evaluation of the way in which the job was described), the evaluation items used in Experiment 1 was replaced with two new items that more directly measured global evaluations of the described work environment (e.g., bad-good, negative-positive). Fifth, a new measure was used to assess participants' perceptions of job-specific competence in order to gauge the extent to which feelings of exclusion affected the perceived fit between participants' personal skills and the prospective job. It is possible, for example, that one may attribute being excluded from a specific domain



due to a lack of domain-specific competence. Finally, I used new items from an established scale to assess the degree to which participants expected to receive support to advance professionally in the work environment given that the items used in Experiment 1 were not reliable.

The hypotheses in Experiment 2 were virtually identical to those of Experiment 1. Specifically, I expected that women would feel more ostracized when they were exposed to gender-exclusive language compared to gender-inclusive or gender-neutral language. Additionally, I expected that women would report more negative affect toward the job environment, report less job-based motivation, less job-based identification, feel less job-based competence and perceive less support for their professional development within the described environment when the job was described using gender-exclusive language rather than gender-inclusive or –neutral language. In light of men’s mixed responses to gendered language in Experiment 1, men’s responses were hypothesized take on one of two patterns. Specifically, men were expected to either react similarly to all three types of language or to react more positively to gender-exclusive language than gender-inclusive or gender-neutral language.

## Method

### Participants

Three-hundred-seventy-six undergraduate participants (179 men and 197 women) volunteered in exchange for extra credit. Three women guessed the purpose of the experiment and were excluded from data analysis resulting in a final sample of  $N = 373$  (179 men and 194 women) that was included in data analysis.

## Design

This experiment used a 2 Participant Sex (male vs. female) x 3 Language Type (gender-exclusive, gender-inclusive, gender-neutral) between subjects design where the latter variable was manipulated between subjects.

## Manipulations and Measures

Manipulation of gendered pronouns in the job description. Three language conditions were used in Experiment 2, namely a gender-exclusive condition, a gender-inclusive condition and a gender-neutral condition. The gender-neutral description substituted gender-neutral words (*employee*) for gender-exclusive (*him*) and gender-inclusive (*him or her*) words. The same basic format of the job overview was used for all three descriptions as that of Experiment 1. Two minor syntactic alterations were made to all three language conditions in order to allow for clear, naturalistic phrasing in the neutral-condition. These changes resulted in eight gendered (and non-gendered) references within each description (see Appendix B for gender-neutral description).

Ostracism measures. Four items measured self-reported feelings of social exclusion. These items were adapted from Williams, Cheung and Choi (2000) and were altered to refer to feelings of *inclusion* rather than feelings of exclusion in order to be less reactive. The following four items were prefaced with the instructions “Please indicate the feelings you would experience during your meeting with the staff person”. Participants were asked to respond to the four items using a 7-point Likert type response scale ranging from “Not at all” (1) to “Very much so” (7): “I would feel ‘connected’”; “I would feel accepted”; “I would feel liked”; “I would feel welcomed”. This scale obtained an  $\alpha$  of .87.

Evaluation of the writing style. The following two items were used to assess prospective feelings of affect in the described work environment using a 7-point Likert type response scale. The first item asked “How bad or good would you feel in the described work environment?” (1 = bad to 7 = good). The second item asked “How negative or positive would you feel in the described work environment?” (1 = negative to 7 = positive). This scale obtained an  $\alpha$  of .90.

Relevance of the job to the self-concept. The items used in Experiment 1 were used again to measure motivation ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and identification ( $\alpha = .81$ ) in Experiment 2. In addition, perceived self-competence was measured with four items adapted from Wagner and Morse’s (1975) Sense of Competence scale. Specifically: “This job would be completely manageable”; “I believe that I would have the skills necessary to perform this job”; “If anyone in this organization could accomplish work-related tasks, it would be me”; and “No one would do this job better than I would”. Response scale ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). This scale obtained an  $\alpha$  of .84.

Support for professional advancement. Items from Lent et al.’s (2001) scale measuring workplace support were adapted to measure the degree to which participants expected to receive support for professional advancement. Items were prefaced by the following instructions: “Imagine that you have taken a job at this organization and have decided to pursue a leadership role within the organization.” Participants were then rate the following items using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all likely” (1) to “Very likely” (7): “How likely would it be that your colleagues would support your decision to pursue a leadership role?”; “How likely would it be that your colleagues

would help you obtain a leadership role?"; "How likely would it be that your boss would support your decision to pursue a leadership role?"; and "How likely would it be that you would have mentorship in pursuing a leadership role?". This scale obtained an  $\alpha$  of .84.

Manipulation check and demographic measures. The same sexism manipulation check used in Experiment 1 was used in Experiment 2 ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

### Procedure

The basic experimental procedure used in Experiment 1 was again used in Experiment 2 with two exceptions. First, participants were randomly assigned to one of three language conditions: Gender-exclusive condition, Gender-inclusive condition or Gender-neutral condition. Second, after reading the job description, participants completed the social exclusion measure first, followed by the remaining five dependent measures in counterbalanced order (i.e., affect, motivation, identification, self-competence and perceived support in professional advancement). Note that in the previous experiment, the social exclusion measure had been administered at the end of the experimental procedure. After the primary dependent variables, participants completed the sexism manipulation check. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## Results

### Manipulation Check

A planned contrast revealed that all participants (male and female) judged the gender-exclusive description to be more sexist ( $M = 4.78$ ) than did participants in the gender-inclusive condition ( $M = 3.93$ ) and gender-neutral condition ( $M = 4.01$ ),  $t(370) = 7.13$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = .74$ .

### Primary dependent variables

The following series of analyses assessed (1) whether the findings from Experiment 2 replicated those of Experiment 1 in terms of feelings of exclusion, motivation and identification and (2) women and men's responses to language condition on three new dependent measures: evaluation of the work environment, job-based competence, and perceived support for professional development in the described work environment. As in Experiment 1, a Participant Sex x Language Type ANOVA tested whether women and men responded differentially to the three language types for each dependent variable. Unfortunately, the 2-way interactions were nonsignificant (see General Discussion for possible reasons for this null finding), although I found a few interesting main effects of participant sex for some of the primary dependent measures. Results of the ANOVA for each dependent variable are described in turn below.

In order to more directly test the hypothesis that women would respond most negatively in the gender-exclusive condition relative to the gender-inclusive and -neutral conditions, I also conducted planned contrasts for each dependent measure comparing women in the gender-exclusive condition to women in the other two conditions (mean scores for men in all three conditions were assigned a contrast weight of zero). This hypothesized effect was supported for feelings of exclusion but was not supported for any of the remaining dependent measures.

Ostracism. Recall that in Experiment 2 questions assessing feelings of exclusion were worded to reflect feelings of *inclusion*. A Participant Sex x Language Type ANOVA revealed only a main effect for participant sex,  $F(1,367) = 6.80, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$ , such that women reported feeling significantly less included ( $M = 4.88$ ) than men ( $M$

= 5.16). Neither the main effect of language type nor the two-way interaction was significant ( $ps > .05$ ). Closer examination of the means revealed a pattern that was consistent with the hypothesized direction: women in the gender-exclusive condition reported feeling less included ( $M = 4.63$ ) than did women in the gender-inclusive condition ( $M = 5.06$ ) and the neutral condition (4.93). A planned contrast revealed that this effect was significant,  $t(367) = -2.19, p = .03$ , Cohen's  $d = .23$  (see Figure 5).

Motivation. The results of the Participant Sex x Language Type ANOVA on motivation revealed no main effect of participant sex, no main effect of language type and no two-way interaction, ( $ps > .05$ ).

Identification. There was also no main effect of participant sex, no main effect of language type and no two-way interaction for identification with the prospective job, ( $ps > .40$ ).

Affect in the work environment. Several new dependent measures were included in Experiment 2. Prospective affect in the work environment was one such new measure. The results of the two-way ANOVA revealed a main effect for participant sex such that women felt less positive about the work environment ( $M = 4.96$ ) than did men ( $M = 5.27$ ),  $F(1, 367) = 5.49, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ . There was no main effect of language type and no two-way interaction, ( $ps > .05$ ).

Job-based competence. The results of the two-way ANOVA on job-based competence revealed a significant main effect of participant sex such that women felt less competent ( $M = 4.90$ ) than men ( $M = 5.22$ ),  $F(1, 367) = 7.97, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$ . There was no main effect of language type and no two-way interaction, ( $ps > .20$ ).

Perceived support for professional advancement. Finally, in terms of perceived support for professional development in the work environment, there was no main effect of language condition, no main effect of participant sex and no two-way interaction, ( $ps > .10$ ).

## Discussion

The results of Experiment 2 provided some equivocal support for a theoretical link between the use of gender-exclusive language and ostracism. When learning about a potential professional environment, women (but not men) felt less included when that environment was described using gender-exclusive language relative to gender-inclusive or gender-neutral language. However, the three types of language did not have a differential effect on women and men's reported job-based motivation, identification with the job, affective evaluation of the work environment, job-based competence and perceived support for professional development in the work environment. Speculations for why these null results may have occurred in Experiment 2, particularly with regard a lack of replication for the motivation and identification the effects observed Experiment 1 are given in the General Discussion.

Although Experiment 2 did not yield the hypothesized interaction of participant sex by language type for any of the primary dependent measures, participant sex by itself had a significant impact on some of the dependent measures. Specifically, women felt less included, evaluated the work environment less positively and reported less job-based competence than did men, regardless of the type of language that was used in the job description. These results are not surprising due to the fact that the work environment was described as “competitive” and “fast-paced” – two stereotypically masculine traits,

which may explain women's lower sense of inclusion, more negative evaluation of the professional environment and less perceived competence relative to men. Be that as it may, this pattern of results is inconsistent with the hypothesized differential effect that the three language types would have on women and men's reactions to the types of language used in the experiment.



## CHAPTER 4

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

Two experiments sought to extend the focus of current ostracism research by investigating individual reactions to exclusionary behavior directed towards their *group*. The present research operationally defined group-based ostracism as gender-exclusive language -- a form of subtly sexist language that makes specific reference to one gender group (*he*) while excluding a second gender group (*she*). Other forms of pronoun-based referential language used in the current work were either explicitly inclusive (i.e., gender-inclusive language, *he or she*) or made no reference to gender-groups whatsoever (i.e., gender-neutral language, *one*). The present research introduced a new experimental paradigm to gauge women and men's responses to these types of gendered (and non-gendered) language. I argued that if gender-exclusive language is a form of group-level ostracism, women should experience more exclusion as well as a number of negative self-relevant cognitions (e.g., decreased motivation) in this condition compared to the other language conditions. In comparison, men should be relatively less responsive to language variations because all three language conditions include their ingroup.

The results of the first experiment largely supported these expectations; women reported feeling more excluded, reported less job-based motivation, identified less with the job, and evaluated the writing style more negatively when the professional context was described by way of gender-exclusive language compared to gender-inclusive language. In comparison, men did not differ in their feelings of exclusion, their evaluation of the writing style or their identification with the job as a function of the type of language that they were exposed to. Interestingly, men did report higher motivation

when the work environment was described using gender-exclusive versus –inclusive language.

In Experiment 2, a gender-neutral language (control) condition was introduced to the experimental design in order to more closely examine women’s responses to gender-exclusive language versus -inclusive language. Results replicated Experiment 1 for feelings of exclusion such that gender-exclusive language led women to feel less included than did non-exclusive language. However, this pattern of results did not hold for motivation, identification, evaluation of the work environment, feelings of competence, and perceived support for professional growth. Specifically, in Experiment 2, although women exposed to gender-exclusive language reported feeling less included than did women exposed to inclusive language, the former group did not report less motivation or identification than the latter group. I suspect that this failure to replicate is likely a reflection of the experimental procedure in Experiment 2 rather than faulty predictions. Recall that in Experiment 1 participants reported the extent to which they felt ostracized *after* they had already reported their motivation and identification with respect to the described job; in Experiment 2, feelings of ostracism were assessed *before* participants were asked to rate their job-based motivation and identification. Thus, reminding the ostracized individual of their exclusion (in Experiment 2) may have lead to reactive behavior (e.g., *more* motivation for the job) while no such reminder (in Experiment 1) may have resulted in a more “pure” response to feeling excluded (e.g., *less* motivation). Importantly, these are post-hoc explanations for the discrepancy in findings between experiments and should be interpreted with caution until empirically verified.

## Gendered Language as Identity Contingencies

The present data suggest that gendered language might also be considered *identity contingencies*. According to Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, and Crosby (2007), when a person encounters a social environment where they suspect that they might be judged based on their group membership (rather than as an individual), that person is likely to search for elements of that environment that offer a clue as to whether it is “identity-safe” versus “identity-threatening”. Purdie-Vaughns and colleagues call these symbols *social identity contingencies*, in that one’s perceived comfort and trust in a setting is contingent on the type of signal (safe or threatening) that the environment offers to that person.

In the present research, women might have perceived gender-exclusive language as an “identity-threatening” contingency while gender-inclusive language may have signaled an “identity-safe” environment. According to Purdie-Vaughns and colleagues (2008), another identity contingency is the presence of other ingroup members in a potentially identity-threatening environment. Recall that in the present research, a question in the manipulation-check scale asked participants to report the perceived sex of the staff member who had described the work environment. An identity-contingency-based hypothesis would expect women to feel most trusting of the described work environment (i.e., perceive it to be most supportive) when the staff representative describing that environment was a woman *and* she used gender-inclusive language to do so. Women’s trust in the environment would be lower, however, in the absence of one or both of these identity-safe contingencies (i.e., perceived male staff-person and/or gender-exclusive language). In support of this hypothesis, women in Experiment 2 who

perceived the staff person to be a woman *and* were exposed to gender-inclusive language, perceived the described work environment to be more supportive of their professional growth ( $M = 5.24$ ) than did women who were exposed to gender-exclusive language ( $M = 4.65$ ) or gender-neutral language ( $M = 4.98$ ) as well as women who perceived the staff person to be a man in any of the language conditions: gender-exclusive, -inclusive or -neutral ( $M$ s = 4.66, 4.76, 4.74 respectively),  $t(188) = 2.02$ ,  $p = .05$ , Cohen's  $d = .30$ .

Importantly, an identity-contingency explanation does not detract from an ostracism-based account of gender-exclusive language use, as perceptions of this type of group-based social exclusion (i.e., ostracism) are inextricably linked to perceptions of identity-contingencies. That is, both ostracism and identity-contingency accounts argue that gender-exclusive language signals a threat among women. An identity-contingency account, however, takes into consideration the *affirming* nature of gender-inclusive language with regard to women's perceptions of a supportive environment, especially when that environment contains other identity-affirming environmental cues (i.e., similar others in that environment).

#### Future Directions

First and foremost, future research using the present experimental paradigm should assess the extent to which women's responses to gender-exclusive language vary as a function of the time at which participants are asked to reflect on their feelings of exclusion relative to the remaining dependent measures. The type of ostracism observed in the present research is subtle and, without explicitly being reminded of their excluded status, ostracized individuals may not actually be aware of *why* they feel less personally

invested in the domain in which they were excluded. However, if participants are *made aware* of their excluded status immediately before they report their personal investment in the domain, it is possible that their subsequent reports may be *inflated* in order to appear interested and competent, both to themselves and to their audience. Thus, by manipulating question order one can systematically vary when participants become aware of their excluded status (i.e., before or after the remaining dependent variables), which in turn will allow this research program to examine the extent to which one must be conscious of ostracism in order to be negatively affected by it.

A second future direction might be to measure variations in individuals' *sensitivity to* the exclusive nature of gender-exclusive language. Ostracism researchers have noted individual differences in people's susceptibility to the aversive nature of ostracism (see Williams, 2007 for a review). One potential individual difference variable is the extent to which one is sensitive to sexism, such that the more one perceives gender-exclusive language to be sexist the more likely one is to feel ostracized. This individual difference may be indexed by the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), which has proven to be a particularly robust predictor for the degree to which individuals attribute subtly sexist behaviors to sexism (Swim, Mallet & Stanger, 2004; Swim, Mallet, Russo-Devosa and Stangor; 2005). A second likely individual difference variable for aversive reactions to gender-exclusive language is the extent to which individuals integrate gender into their self-concept (i.e., *gender schematicity*; Markus, Crane, Bernstein, & Siladi, 1982). Individuals who are gender-schematic, or view their gender as a strong part of who they are, are likely to be particularly affronted by gender-exclusive language when it is their gender-group that is excluded. Conversely, gender-

aschematic individuals view their gender as less relevant to their self-concept and may be less offended when their gender-group is linguistically excluded. These are but two of undoubtedly many individual difference variables that might moderate feelings of exclusion as a function of gender-exclusive language.

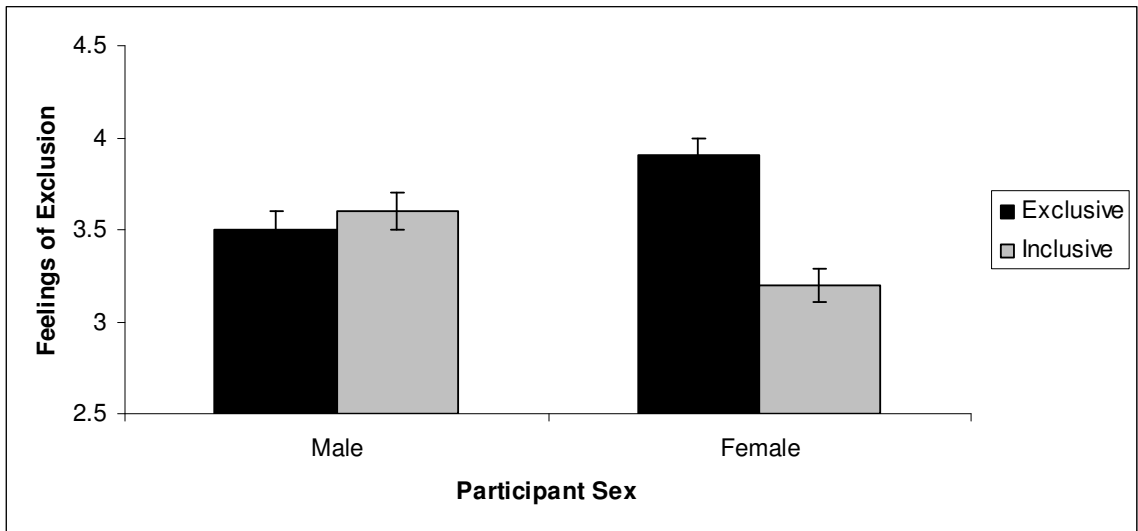
A third direction for the present research is to assess the extent to which males feel ostracized by *feminine* gender-exclusive language. By all accounts, the use of gender-exclusive “she” fits Williams’ (2007) definition of ostracism as its use does indeed exclude individuals (i.e., males). However, the use of the gender-exclusive “she” differs from the gender-exclusive “he” in a fundamental way. That is, gender-exclusive “she” has historically been reserved to refer to one or more females. Readers are not accustomed to experiencing this “marked” type of language in the generic form (Spencer, 1978; Madson, & Hessling, 1999). Related to this, the gender-exclusive “she” could be interpreted by the reader as a political statement on the part of the speaker (Madson & Shoda, 2006). Thus, it is unlikely that men would uniformly feel ostracized by gender-exclusive language. Rather, men’s responses to this type of linguistic exclusivity would likely take on a number of forms (e.g., confusion, anger, apathy), which might potentially trump feelings of exclusion observed among women. Nonetheless, this is an empirical question that could be addressed using the present experimental paradigm.

Fourth, as suggested in the identity contingency discussion in the previous section, individuals’ reactions to gender-exclusive language may vary as a function of *who* is using the gender-exclusive language. For example, women might make different attributions about a woman who uses masculine gender-exclusive language than they would a man. A woman’s communication style that employs gender-exclusive language

may be viewed as less sexist than that of a man, which may alleviate feelings of exclusion for the female listener. Alternatively, the aversive nature of gender-exclusive language might trump any alleviating effect that female speakers might have on feelings of exclusion. Thus, a fourth avenue for the present line of research is to *manipulate* the sex of the individual who is using gender-exclusive language in order to assess differences in responses to ostracism as a function of whether it is a member of one's gender-group or an out-group member who is doing the ostracizing.

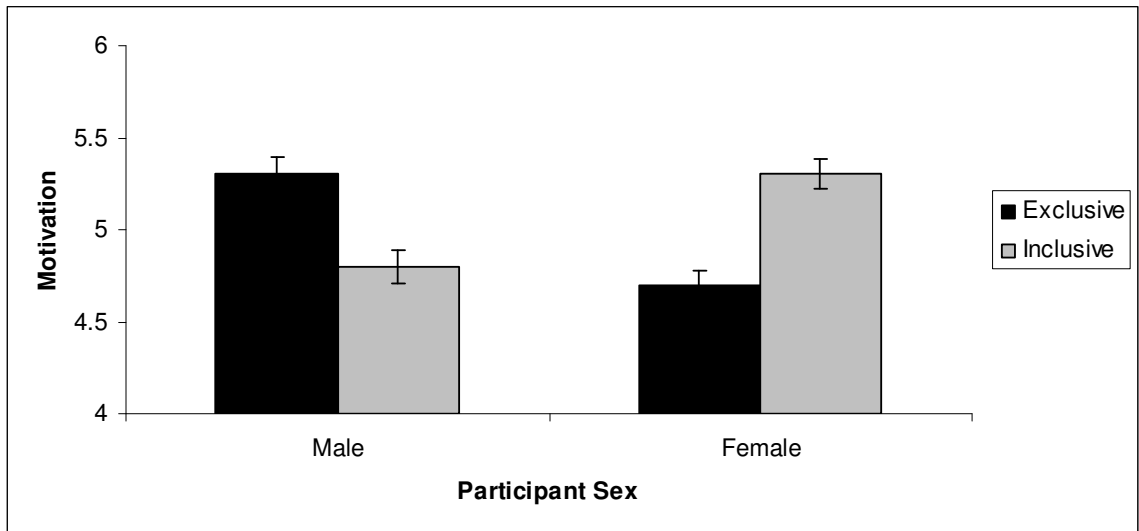
Finally, future research should assess the aversive nature of gender-exclusive language in actual interpersonal situations. Although subtly sexist language is becoming less socially acceptable and therefore less common in formal contexts (e.g., professional writing; prepared speeches), it is still likely to occur in more informal contexts (e.g., interpersonal discourse; offhand examples). Social psychological research provides ample opportunity to assess participants' responses to the seemingly spontaneous use of gender-exclusive language. For example, experimental instructions are a ready means of varying the type of gendered (or non-gendered) language that participants are exposed to prior to some behavioral measure. One experiment could assess participants' effort and overall performance on a puzzle task after participants encounter an experimenter who casually uses or does not use gender-exclusive language to explain how a person "usually" performs on a puzzle task. This type of naturalistic context would provide an externally valid and naturalistic means of assessing the potential negative side-effects of this form of subtle ostracism.

**Figure 1. Experiment 1: Effect of Participant Sex x Language Type on feelings of exclusion.**

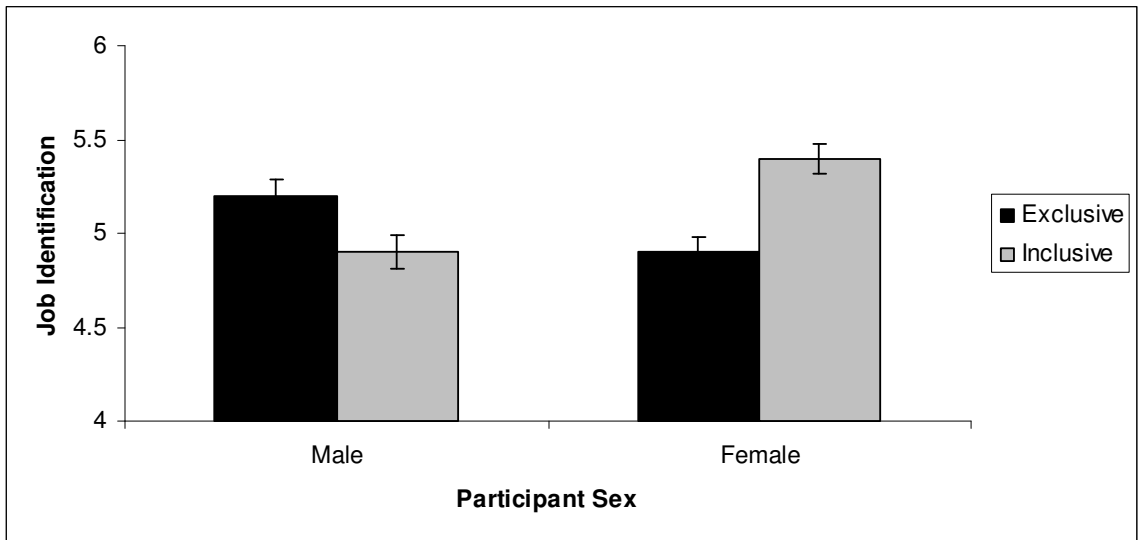




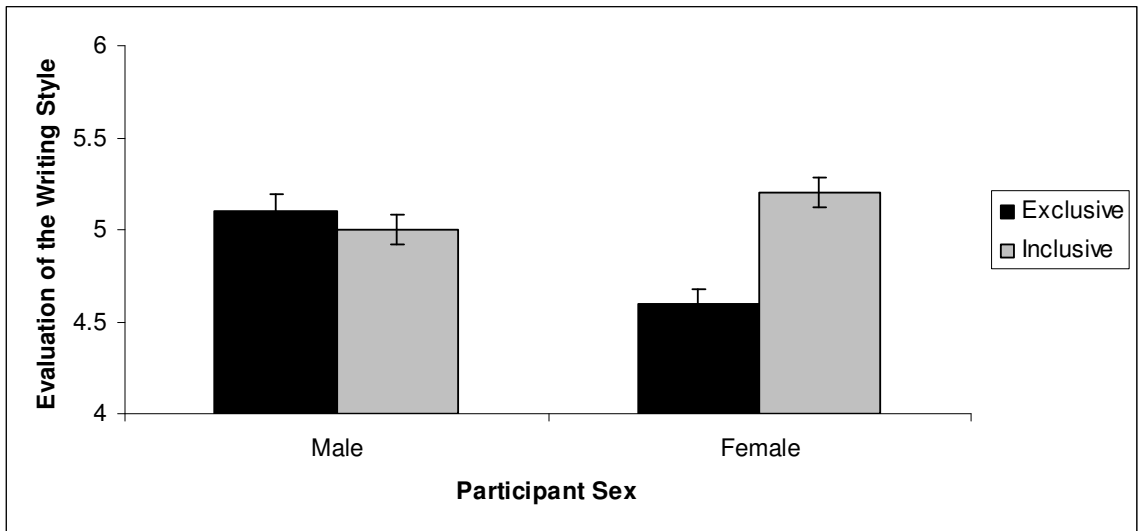
**Figure 2. Experiment 1: Effect of Participant Sex x Language Type on job motivation.**



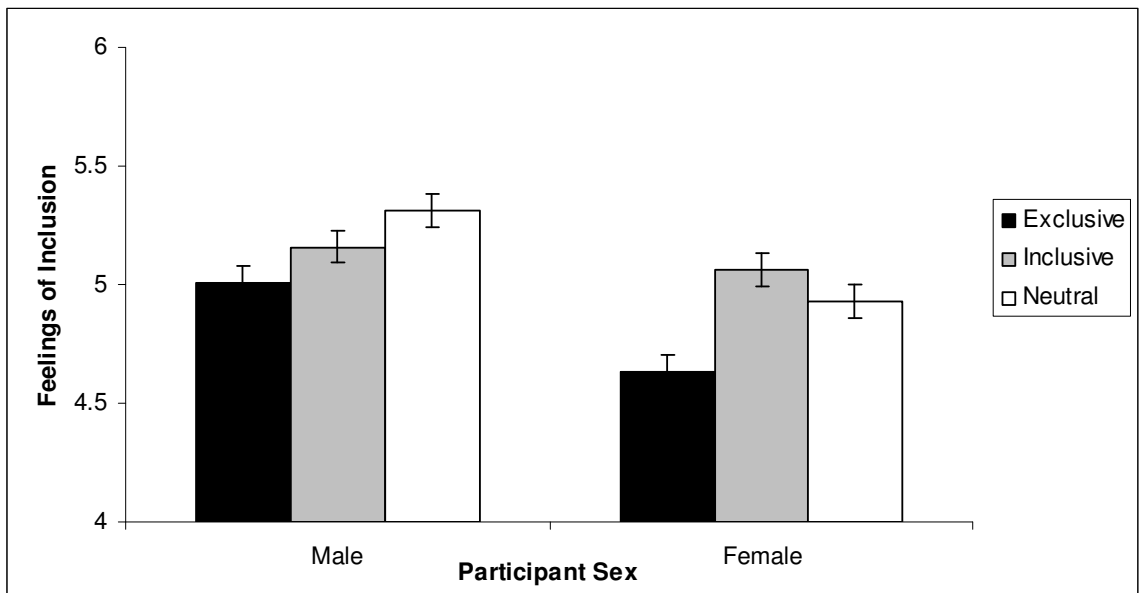
**Figure 3. Experiment 1: Effect of Participant Sex x Language Type on identification with the job.**



**Figure 4. Experiment 1: Effect of Participant Sex x Language Type on evaluation of the writing style.**



**Figure 5. Experiment 2: Effect of Participant Sex x Language Type on feelings of inclusion.**



## APPENDIX A

### JOB DESCRIPTION IN EXPERIMENT 1 USING GENDER-EXCLUSIVE LANGUAGE (EMBOLDENED) AND GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE (BRACKETED).

In our organization, our employee-base is continually growing and thriving. Those who are typically hired are enthusiastic and bright college graduates; we usually know a good employee when we see **him** [him or her]. We are continually working to maintain a work environment that emphasizes individual expression. We want our **guys** [employees] to feel as though they have the ability to maneuver in terms of communicating their ideas. When it comes to approaching a difficult task at work, we realize the benefits of taking a more indirect and non-conventional approach.

Our organization is continually growing. What that means for an employee here is that **he** [he or she] needs to be able to work in a fast-paced and energetic work environment. We certainly don't want an employee's workload to catch **him** [them] unprepared. However, if an employee's workload is more strenuous than that of other employees, we will call a planning meeting with the team-leader at which point **he** [he or she] will make every effort to more equally distribute that employee's duties. We expect full employee support in fulfilling our goal of becoming a leading organization in our field. Therefore, on a particularly busy day, an employee may be asked to stay after work hours. Naturally, **he** [he or she] will be compensated for any extra time that **he** [he or she] puts in; the **guys** [people] in payroll are very good at what they do.

Finally, we expect our employees to work so that competing organizations are less likely to prosper. We believe in rewarding employees who assume leadership and responsibility in our organization. We think that when we come across an outstanding employee, rewarding **him** [him or her] will, in the end, boost the company's overall productivity. Some examples in the reward system that we have are extended paid-vacation and monetary bonuses. Employees are currently very pleased with our reward system; the harder **those guys** [they] work the more money they make!

If this work environment sounds like a good fit for you, we encourage you to apply!

## APPENDIX B

### JOB DESCRIPTIONS USED IN EXPERIMENT 2 FOR THE CONTROL CONDITION.

In our organization, our employee-base is continually growing and thriving. Those who are typically hired are enthusiastic and bright college graduates; we usually know a potentially good **employee**. We are continually working to maintain a work environment that emphasizes individual expression. We want an **employee** to feel as though they have the ability to maneuver in terms of communicating their ideas. When it comes to approaching a difficult task at work, we realize the benefits of taking a more indirect and non-conventional approach.

Our organization is continually growing. What that means is that **employees** here need to be able to work in a fast-paced and energetic work environment. We certainly don't want an **employee** to be caught off guard by their workload. However, if an employee's workload is more strenuous than that of other employees, we will call a planning meeting with the **team-leader who** will make every effort to more equally distribute that employee's duties.

We expect full employee support in fulfilling our goal of becoming a leading organization in our field. Therefore, on a particularly busy day, an employee may be asked to stay after work hours. Naturally, **that employee** will be compensated for any extra time put in.

Finally, we expect our employees to work so that competing organizations are less likely to prosper. We believe in rewarding employees who assumes leadership and

responsibility in our organization. We think that when we come across an outstanding employee, rewarding **that employee** will, in the end, boost the company's overall productivity. Some examples in the reward system that we have are extended paid-vacation and monetary bonuses. Employees are currently very pleased with our reward system; the harder **an employee** works the more money **that employee** makes!

If this work environment sounds like a good fit for you, we encourage you to apply!



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