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"Kings Are Royaler Than Queens":
Language and Socialization

Amy Sheldon

Early childhood experiences socialize children into their gender roles. One component in this socialization is the English language. Our language reflects sexist, male-centered attitudes that perpetuate the trivialization, marginalization, and invisibility of female experience. It sets the male experience up as the norm, the normal. This is one major way that women are left out of our culture. The invisibility of the female experience has a direct bearing on early childhood educators, as well as on children. For example, child care professionals, like other women in the work force, are consistently paid 40% less than their male counterparts. The reason we are now struggling to raise the consciousness of our nation about the need for quality child care and appropriately paid child care professionals is because our society has long devalued what it considers "women's work." The English language reflects our culture's negative attitudes toward women and passes these attitudes on to our children.

Learning about gender through language

A few weeks ago my 6½-year-old daughter, Nicole, was talking about one of her stuffed animals. She described it as a "he." The animal has no genitals and no clothes. I asked her why she had called it a "he." She said that she likes "he's" better than "she's" and "anyway there are more 'he's' than 'she's.'"

I pondered this on and off for a few weeks. Her assertion that she likes males better than females is not supported by her behavior. Her good friends at school are girls, as is her special friend at home, her 3-year-old sister, Talia. Yesterday Nicole told me that she doesn't even like boys. As for her second comment, there aren't more males in the world than females, not even in her particular day-to-day world. Almost every adult at her school is female, and there are exactly equal numbers of males and females in her classroom. The population of children at her small school is pretty equally divided between boys and girls; I even checked this on the school list that we have. In her home neighborhood, there are more girls than boys. Furthermore, Nicole lives in an egalitarian household due to the continual efforts of both of her parents. This household contains three females and one male. So from where does she get her impression that there are more males than females?

It's no secret that the male characters in children's books and television programs outnumber the females. One trip to the children's book section of a library or one ses-

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Our language reflects sexist, male-centered attitudes that perpetuate the trivialization, marginalization, and invisibility of female experience.
sion watching children’s television programs will teach the novice parent that. But in our house, my children’s books are screened to make sure that female characters are in abundance and are doing important, exciting things. And my daughters’ television watching is limited and also “guided.” We have tried to minimize the male-dominated world that is fed to her by these forms of media and to provide female-centered alternatives.

But there is still one source of information about our culture that she comes into contact with constantly: our language. I am sure that the language that she has spent the last 6 1/2 years speaking, hearing, and mastering has reinforced her belief in the preponderance of “he’s” over “she’s.” Just about everybody uses he more than she in English. That’s because we use he to refer to someone or something that may not even be male:

“What color is that bird in the backyard?”

“He’s blue with a white chest.”

What I see happening with my daughter is that this convention in her language is causing her to think in a child’s very concrete sense that more “he’s” than “she’s” actually exist out there in the world. Females become invisible if you rarely refer to them. So Nicole is right about English, but she’s not right about the world in which she lives. Due to no fault of her own, she has been led to misperceive or misconstrue ordinary daily events because of the powerful influence that language has on us. Put another way, her language has been tricking her. It’s been tricking us all.

**Trying to counterbalance male-centered language**

Today she did it again, but I was prepared this time. She received a present in the mail. It was a white teddy bear wearing just a red scarf.

No genitals. She kept referring to her new bear as “he.” I asked her why she was doing that. How did she know it was a “he”? Our conversation continued like this:

*Nicole:* “I’m more used to ‘he.’”

*Me:* “Why?”

*Nicole:* “Because I always say ‘he.’ Because you say the turtle is a ‘she’ and I say the turtle is a ‘he.’ Why are you so fussy? It’s just my imagination.”

The reference to the turtle goes back a week or so when our family had been out on a walk and had seen a turtle swimming in a canal. Someone referred to it as a “he.” I said that it was a “he” or a “she” and we didn’t know which because we couldn’t see its sex. To balance out our conversation about the turtle, I then started referring it as a “she.”

I have been keeping fairly close
tabs on Nicole’s language development. It started as an extension of my professional work in child language development. As her language has become more adult-like, I have seen how it has been eroding my efforts to provide the female-centered counterbalance that every girl’s and woman’s life needs to this male-centered world. This struggle against the erosion of the female in my children’s lives has made me an activist. Language is one of the areas that need change.

My activism takes the form of drawing the attention of my conversational partners to their use of language in situations where they assume that someone or something is male. For example, when we can’t tell the gender of some animal or toy (or whatever we are referring to) because it is unspecified or hidden from our view, why don’t we acknowledge this? Although it is conventional to say he, our language doesn’t force us to; we have other choices. For instance, we can refer to what we are talking about as it. Or, we can alternate and sometimes call it a “she” and sometimes a “he” rather than always assuming it is a male. We can always call beings she just to get people’s attention and to force them to rethink their habitual choice of he and the expectations and assumptions about gender that underlie that choice. Using she can be a way of equalizing the current imbalance that the overuse of he creates.

All of these ideas work nicely in theory but in my house, even though my children are used to hearing me say she when others say he, this unfortunately has had—at best—an uncertain effect on them. Sometimes they acknowledge that I am right. Other times they resist me. As generations have discovered before me, a parent’s influence on how their children use language is limited. What is most distressing about the sexist way that my children are being shaped by English is that I catch them denying the reality of what they are actually seeing. This happened when Nicole insisted that there were more “he’s” than “she’s” in her world. It also happens when they, like the adults around them, address an all-female or mixed-sex group of friends as “guys.” At a demonstration we attended at the South Florida Science Museum, the group leader referred to each of the marine animals we handled as “he” or “this guy.” In fact, they were mostly her-

Most people use “he” much more often than “she,” using “he” to refer to someone or something that may not even be male. This tricks children, and us, into thinking there are more “he’s” than “she’s.”
maphrodites (having both female and male reproductive capacities), but the group leader never told the group this. Because sexism and gender stereotyping are so pervasive in our culture, even when families raise their children in an egalitarian and supportive home it is no guarantee that children can escape or undo negative social attitudes toward females, or rigid male role models. As Nicole and Talia get older, I see further proof of this. For example, in the last two months our daughters have told me the following disturbing things:

**Nicole:** “Mom, kings are royaler than queens.”

**Me:** “Why?”

**Nicole:** “Because on ‘Mister Rogers’ when the trolley stops at the King and the Queen, the King answers the questions the most.”

**Nicole:** “Shira [her female music teacher] could be a conductor of a band, but usually they're boys.”

**Me:** “There are women conductors, too.”

**Nicole:** “I know, but all the ones I saw are boys.” (i.e., men.)

Our 3-year-old daughter, Talia, was playing with two Fisher Price toys: a female figure and a tractor. I had put the figure into the tractor. We had the following conversation:

**Talia:** “No, she doesn't go there.”

**Me:** “Why?”

**Talia:** “Because she’s the sister.”

**Me:** “Then who goes there?”

**Talia:** “The daddy.”

**Choosing words that allow women to be visible**

Thus do our language and our cultural images teach us about gender whether we want them to or not. The question I am currently struggling with is how parents, friends, relatives, child educators, and advocates can stop the perpetuation of female invisibility that is communicated through language and that is already at work on the next generation. I know that it can be done. Here is one of my favorite examples. Mary is one of Talia’s child care providers. She told me about a weekend trip to a lake that she took with her parents, her significant other, and his 13-year-old son. The boy was talking about fishermen, and Mary pointed out rather matter-of-factly that it wasn’t really fair to talk about fishermen because women also like to fish. Mary’s mother then mentioned a few such famous women that she knew about. Mary’s father suggested that they use angler instead of fisherman. For the rest of that trip everyone used angler. This is a change that five speakers of English consciously made. They chose to use a word to describe an activity in a way that is not demeaning to women, for to be
The question I am currently struggling with is how parents, friends, relatives, child educators, and advocates can stop the perpetuation of female invisibility that is communicated through language.

Invisible is a way of being demeaned. Their choice allows the listener to create images of both women and men fishing. It affected the way three generations in that family think about and use English. In addition, I’m sure that the boy, who didn’t understand what the problem was initially, learned something valuable about what kind of choices people have in life. We are even free to change language.

Taking an active role in changing our language must become part of everyone’s arsenal of nonsexist child raising techniques. My 3-year-old daughter helped me out a few days ago. As we were waiting in a restaurant, she said, “Where’s our server?” That word immediately found a place in my mental dictionary, bumping out the awkward attempt to neutralize waiter with waitron that has become part of our local restaurant scene. For me, leaving my daughters with caregivers and educators who are sensitive to the biased messages that can be found in language, and who are working to change those messages so that they don’t exclude half of the world’s population, has become a priority.

I wish I could see that become a part of the job descriptions of all the people that serve children. I was certainly uncomfortable with the experience that my daughters had with their dental hygienist a few weeks ago. She probably thought that she was finessing the dental procedure by talking to them at what she imagined was the generic 3-year-old and 6-year-old conversational level. She called the overhead dental lamp “Mr. Sunshine” and the vacuum pipe that they put in your mouth “Mr. Thirsty.” I gathered my courage and asked her whether or not there were any “Miss” anythings in her office. For my efforts I got a blank stare and the reply, “We’ve always called them Mr. Sunshine and Mr. Thirsty.” Clearly, she did not understand the problem.

Improving our language is part of improving our society

I admit, language is an abstract thing. It’s hard sometimes to see it as part of the problem. It’s not an issue that is dramatic and life threatening, but it is fundamental to the problem of how our culture construes women and how women interpret their lives. It is thus one of the social institutions that must also change. As I raise my two little girls, these everyday experiences show me a small, but perhaps representative, slice of how they are learning the culturally accepted ways of being women and men in this society. Some of the ways I fundamentally disagree with.

The more I see, the more I feel the need for us to take an even closer look at influences on children’s lives in order to see what they are learning about growing up female and male. How much of what they are learning are behaviors and attitudes that we want adults to drop when they get to be adults? Finally, I have another, rather selfish, reason for asking people to say “stop” and to find alternatives to sexist language: I don’t want to feel so alone at places like my daughters’ dental office when I speak up.

For further reading

Sexism and nonsexism in children’s literature


Sexism in language


Non-sexism in schools

Speech Communication Association.

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