

## EXPLAINING AGE AND GENDER EFFECTS ON ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXIST LANGUAGE

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*This study examined perspective taking, empathic concern, and attitude toward women as potential mediators of age and gender effects on college students' attitudes toward sexist language. Perspective taking fully mediated the small age effect found in men. Attitude toward women partially mediated the gender effect, reducing it by 51%. Empathic concern mediated neither age nor gender effects.*

**Keywords:** *sexist language; attitudes toward women; neosexism; perspective taking; empathic concern*

Over the past 30 years, efforts to eradicate sexism from the English language have produced both change and controversy (*American Heritage Book of English Usage*, 1996). Supporters of language reform have endeavored to replace false generics (e.g., *he, mankind*), hierarchic and separatist terms (e.g., *drum major / majorette*), and terms that withhold adulthood (e.g., *girl* as opposed to *woman*) with inclusive expressions (Miller & Swift, 1988). Language reformers have been only moderately successful, but their efforts have provoked lively debate.

Some people who oppose reform believe preference for inclusive language is based solely on feminist ideology (Graglia, 1998). Others have asserted that requiring inclusive language restricts freedom of speech

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(Ravitch, 2004) and is a form of censorship (Kingston & Loveless, 1977). In contrast, supporters of inclusive language have asserted that masculine-based language does not reflect social reality (Carter, 1980), is discriminatory (Peterson, 1994), leads to ambiguity (*American Heritage Book of English Usage*, 1996), and constructs unequal power relationships (Shaw & Hoerber, 2003). Many scholars reason that sexist language perpetuates the existing patriarchy. They argue that adoption of inclusive terms could advance equality of the sexes (Kleinman, 2002; Matheson & Kristiansen, 1987; Peterson, 1994; Spender, 1990).

Opinions aside, empirical research has shown that sexist language does have deleterious effects that, for the most part, accrue to women (Schau & Scott, 1984). For example, Hyde (1984) and Hamilton (1991) found that sexist language can suggest that the masculine is the norm and that the feminine is the exception. Hyde further found that sexist language can affect the gender schemas of girls and boys, causing them to develop different notions of what it means to be feminine or masculine. McConnell and Fazio (1996), Merritt and Kok (1995), and Ng (1990) reported that sexist language creates masculine images in the mind of the listener. Briere and Lanktree (1983) and Dayhoff (1983) demonstrated that sexist language limits views of vocational options.

In 1998, we defined sexist language as “words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between women and men or exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender” (Parks & Robertson, 1998a, p. 455). Subsequently, we constructed an instrument to measure attitudes toward sexist language and found significant and meaningful age differences in these attitudes (Parks & Robertson, 1998b, 2000, 2001). Older persons were more receptive to inclusive language than were younger persons. This finding paralleled earlier findings of Rubin and Greene (1991).

We have also consistently found a meaningful gender effect (Parks & Robertson, 1998b, 2002, 2004), with women being more receptive to inclusive language than men (Cohen's  $d$ s = .69-1.43). In a sample of 18- to 20-year-olds, we found that attitude toward women partially mediated this gender effect, significantly reducing it by 61% (Parks & Robertson, 2004).

In the present study, we investigated additional, potential mediators of the gender effect as well as possible mediators of the age effect. We followed the recommendation of participants in an earlier study who had suggested that empathy for those affected by sexist language might lead people to be more receptive to inclusive language (Parks & Robertson, 2002). This suggestion had intuitive appeal for explaining the age and gender effects we had previously identified. Perhaps as individuals move into adulthood, they develop more empathy for those affected by sexist language. Perhaps women, who are more directly affected by sexist language, are more empathic toward those demeaned by such language.

Davis (1983) defined *empathy* as “the reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another” (p. 113). He conceptualized empathy as a multidimensional construct composed of four overlapping, yet distinct, aspects: perspective taking (PT), empathic concern (EC), fantasy seeking, and personal distress. He then created scales to measure each construct. Of these, the PT and EC scales were most relevant to the present study. Davis and Oathout (1987) defined *PT* as “the cognitive tendency to see things from another’s point of view” and *EC* as an affective “tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for others” (p. 398). Davis (1983) found both PT and EC were moderately related to measures of sensitivity to others ( $r_s = .33-.37$  and  $.55-.58$ , respectively).

Several studies have detected age or gender differences in EC and PT. For example, Davis and Franzoi (1991) found small longitudinal increases in EC and PT during high school. Their results, as well as those of Davis and Oathout (1987), also revealed that high school and college women scored higher than men on both scales. These findings reinforced our prediction that EC and PT would mediate age and gender effects on attitudes toward sexist language. Indeed, the present study confirmed that PT fully mediated a small age effect within men; however, the findings rejected EC as a mediator of either age or gender effects. Again, attitude toward women partially mediated the gender effect.

Participants were 402 undergraduate students enrolled in five different colleges in a midsize, midwestern university in the United States. The majority (84%) were of Western European heritage. The remainder were Black/African American (4%), Hispanic/Latino/a (3%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1%), American Indian (.2%), of more than one ethnicity/other (7%), or unknown (1%). The mean age of the participants was 19.2 years ( $SD = 1.71$ ). Of the participants, 72% ( $n = 291$ ) were 18 to 19 years old, and 28% ( $n = 111$ ) were 21 to 23 years old. Women ( $n = 256$ ) composed 64% of the sample, 63% of the 18- to 19-year-olds, and 67% of the 21- to 23-year-olds.

We used four scales, one as the dependent variable and three as potential mediators. On all instruments, each participant’s score was the total of the scale items. Attitudes toward sexist language, the dependent variable, were measured with the Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language—General (IASNL-G; Parks & Robertson, 2000, 2001). The IASNL-G contains 21 items that are scored on a Likert-type scale from 1 to 5. The instrument has shown strong content, construct, and discriminant validity (Parks & Robertson, 2000, 2001). Cronbach’s alphas have ranged from .85 to .91 (Parks & Robertson, 2000, 2001, 2004). Alpha in the present study was .84.

The PT and EC scales from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1983, 1996) were used to measure the cognitive and affective facets of empathy, respectively. Each scale contains 7 items scored 0

(*does not describe me well*) to 4 (*describes me very well*). Higher scores on each scale indicate greater capacity for PT or EC. The PT scale contains one item that uses the term *other guy's* and another item using the phrase *put myself in his shoes*. For this study, we changed those terms to *other person's* and *put myself in their shoes*.

Davis (1983) and Unger and Thumhuri (1997) established the validity of the IRI in samples of undergraduate college students and adults. Davis also reported the internal consistency of each scale, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .71 to .77 and with test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from .62 to .71. Subsequent studies have reported Cronbach's alphas of .65 to .82 for EC and .64 to .80 for PT (Constantine & Gainor, 2001; Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003; Perez-Albeniz & de Paul, 2003; Pulos, Elison, & Lennon, 2004). In the present study, alpha was .71 for EC and .78 for PT. Factor analyses have supported the four-factor structure of the IRI (Cliffordson, 2002; Davis, 1979). More recently, Alterman, McDermott, Cacciola, and Rutherford (2003) further examined the latent structure of the IRI. They concluded the four sections were not distinctly different, but the strongest components were EC and PT.

Attitude toward women, another potential mediator, was measured with the Neosexism Scale (NS; Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & Joly, 1995). Tougas et al. defined *neosexism* as the "manifestation of a conflict between egalitarian values and residual negative feelings toward women" (p. 843). Campbell, Schellenberg, and Senn (1997) further noted that the NS reveals prejudices toward women without requiring the respondents to admit that they believe women are inferior to men. The NS contains 11 items scored on a Likert scale. To facilitate interpretation, we reversed the anchors of the original scale so that 1 = *disagree strongly* and 7 = *agree strongly*. With this modification, the range of scores on the NS was 11 to 77, with higher scores representing more egalitarian views of women. The NS has demonstrated construct validity by correlating with other measures of attitude toward women ( $r = .59-.70$ ; Campbell et al., 1997; Parks & Robertson, 2004). Tougas et al. reported test-retest reliability of  $r = .82$ . Cronbach's alphas in previous studies ranged from .76 to .81 (Campbell et al., 1997; Parks & Robertson, 2004; Tougas et al., 1995). In the present study, alpha was .80.

After receiving permission from our institutional review board, we collected data in two phases. In spring 2003, we used stratified random sampling to select upper-division courses being offered that semester. In fall 2003, we used a convenience sample of first-year, undergraduate, English composition classes. In both phases, a White, female research assistant invited students in the selected courses to participate in the study and subsequently collected the data. All responses were anonymous.

Table 1  
*Descriptive Data for 402 Undergraduate College Students on the Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist / Nonsexist Language–General (IASNL-G), the Neosexism Scale (NS), the Empathic Concern Scale (EC), and the Perspective Taking Scale (PT)*

Instrument	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Possible Range	Sample Range	Score Interpretation
IASNL-G	58.50	11.78	21-105	25-103	52.6-73.5 = undecided
NS <sup>a</sup>	55.55	10.10	11-77	17-76	44 = neither <i>agree</i> nor <i>disagree</i>
EC	19.78	4.23	0-28	4-28	14 = midpoint between <i>does not describe me well</i> and <i>describes me very well</i>
PT1	6.89	5.01	0-28	3-28	14 = midpoint between <i>does not describe me well</i> and <i>describes me very well</i>

*Note.* The IASNL-G (Parks & Robertson, 2000, 2001) contains 21 items scored 1 to 5; the NS (Tougas et al., 1995) contains 11 items scored 1 to 7. Both the EC and the PT (Davis, 1996) contain 7 items scored 0 to 4. Each participant's score on all scales is his or her total score across scale items. Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward inclusive language or women, a higher level of empathy, or greater perspective-taking capacity. a. The scale direction is reversed from the original scoring of Tougas et al. (1995).

Table 2  
*Age and Gender Means and Standard Deviations on the Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist / Nonsexist Language–General (IASNL-G), the Neosexism Scale (NS), the Empathic Concern Scale (EC), and the Perspective Taking Scale (PT)*

Instrument	Age				Gender			
	18-19 Years ( <i>n</i> = 291)		21-23 Years ( <i>n</i> = 111)		Women ( <i>n</i> = 256)		Men ( <i>n</i> = 146)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
IASNL-G	57.50	10.56	61.10	14.21	61.63	10.67	52.99	11.64
NS <sup>a</sup>	55.02	9.77	56.95	10.84	59.25	8.12	49.08	9.99
EC	19.82	4.19	19.67	4.36	20.79	3.69	17.99	4.53
PT	16.41	4.93	18.14	5.02	17.22	4.82	16.30	5.29

*Note:* The IASNL-G (Parks & Robertson, 2000, 2001) contains 21 items scored 1 to 5; the NS (Tougas et al., 1995) contains 11 items scored 1 to 7. Both the EC and the PT (Davis, 1996) contain 7 items scored 0 to 4. Each participant's score on all scales is his or her total across scale items. Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward inclusive language or women, a higher level of empathy, or greater perspective-taking capacity. a. The scale direction is reversed from the original scoring of Tougas et al. (1995).

Means and standard deviations for all participants are presented in Table 1. On average, participants' attitudes toward sexist language were in the "undecided" range of the IASNL-G. The means were slightly above the midpoints of the NS, EC, and PT scales. Table 2 contains means and standard deviations on all instruments by age and gender.

Table 3

*Intercorrelations Among Scores on the Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language-General (IASNL-G), the Neosexism Scale (NS), the Empathic Concern Scale (EC), the Perspective Taking Scale (PT), Gender, and Age (N = 402)*

	IASNL-G	NS <sup>a</sup>	EC	PT	Gender	Age
IASNL-G						
Total sample	—	.46*	.19*	.20*	.35*	.14*
Women	—	.27*	.08	.10	—	.11
Men	—	.46*	.10	.30*	—	.18
NS		—	.41*	.20*	.49*	.09
EC			—	.39*	.32*	-.02
PT				—	.09	.15*
Gender					—	.04
Age						—

*Note.* Women were coded 2; men were coded 1; the IASNL-G (Parks & Roberton, 2000, 2001) contains 21 items scored 1-5; the NS (Tougas et al., 1995) contains 11 items scored 1 to 7. Both the EC and the PT (Davis, 1996) contain 7 items scored 0 to 4. Each participant's score on all scales is his or her total across scale items. Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward inclusive language or women, a higher level of empathy, or greater perspective-taking capacity.

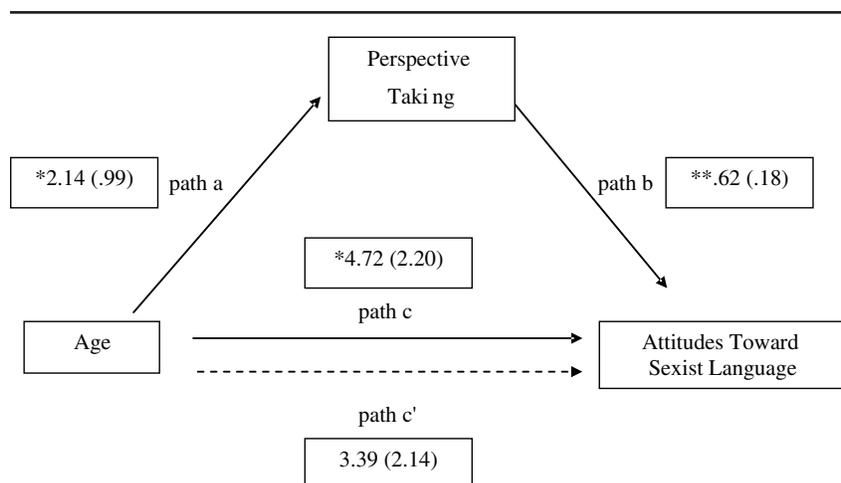
a. The scale direction is reversed from the original scoring of Tougas et al. (1995).

\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

Correlations among the variables appear in Table 3. Age had a low correlation with the IASNL-G, accounting for only 2% of the variance. This finding is consistent with a previous comparison of these two age groups (Parks & Roberton, 1998b). Also consistent with previous findings, gender accounted for 12% of the variance in the IASNL-G (Parks & Roberton, 1998b, 2002, 2004). Examination of the proposed mediator variables showed that the NS correlated with the IASNL-G at a moderate .46, indicating that attitude toward women accounted for 21% of the variance in attitudes toward sexist language. EC and PT had significant, but weak, correlations with the IASNL-G.

We used Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step approach to evaluate the influence of the proposed mediators on the age and gender effects ( $\alpha \leq .05$ ). In Step 1, the effect of age on attitudes toward sexist language was significant ( $p = .01, R^2 = .02$ ). Participants 21 to 23 years old were slightly more supportive of inclusive language than were the 18- to 19-year-olds.

In Step 2, neither EC nor NS yielded significant betas when regressed on age, thus eliminating these variables as mediators of the age effect. Sobel's (1982) test (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2004) revealed that the age effect was partially mediated by PT, which significantly reduced it by 21% ( $z = 2.34, p = .02$ ). When the scores of women and men were examined separately, however, the age effect on attitudes toward sexist language was nonsignificant for women ( $p = .09$ ) but significant for men ( $p = .03, R^2 = .03$ ). PT fully mediated the men's age effect, reducing it by 28% (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients (*b*) and Standard Errors (in parentheses) Associated With the Mediation Test of the Age Effect on Men's Attitudes Toward Sexist Language (Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language-General).**

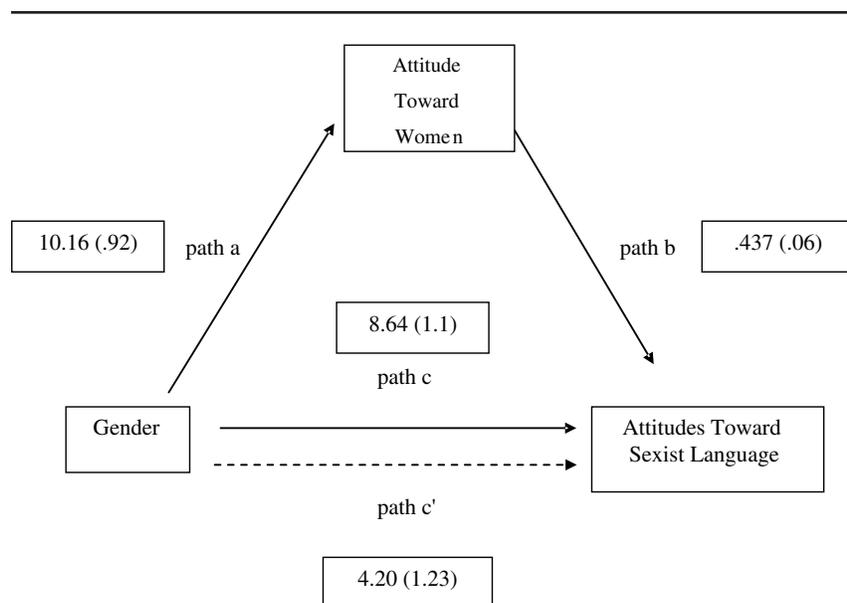
*Note.* Path *c* is the unmediated age effect. Path *c'* is the age effect as mediated by perspective taking (Perspective Taking Scale).

\* $p = .03$ . \*\* $p = .001$ .

The effect of gender on attitudes toward sexist language was also significant ( $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .12$ ). Attitude toward women (NS) was the only proposed mediator of gender that met all the mediation criteria (Figure 2). Sobel's (1982) test (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2004) revealed that NS significantly reduced the relationship between gender and attitudes toward sexist language by 51% ( $z = 6.21$ ,  $p = .0001$ ). This result was similar to our previous finding that NS reduced the effect of gender on the IASNL-G by 61% (Parks & Robertson, 2004).

In this study, we set out to understand what "age" and "gender" represented in the context of attitudes toward sexist language. Although the younger and older students were separated by only 2 to 5 years, age did have a significant but small effect on the men's attitudes. Subsequent studies that use a broader age range could reveal a more meaningful age effect. Such studies might also probe cohort effects, such as the influence of education and socialization.

Although the data in this study were cross-sectional, the fact that a measure of cognitive empathy (PT) fully mediated the age effect in men implies that over the college years, men become slightly more capable of taking the perspective of those affected by sexist language. On the other hand, a measure of affective empathy (EC) did not mediate the age effect in men. These results together suggest that as college men mature, they might react more favorably to cognitive arguments regarding sexist language than to emotional appeals.



*Figure 2.* Unstandardized Regression Coefficients (*b*) and Standard Errors (in Parentheses) Associated With the Mediation Test of the Gender Effect on Attitudes Toward Sexist Language (Inventory of Attitudes Toward Sexist/Nonsexist Language-General).

*Note.* All beta coefficients were significant at  $p = .001$ . Path *c* is the unmediated gender effect. Path *c'* is the gender effect as mediated by attitude toward women (Neosexism Scale).

Affective empathy (EC) mediated neither age nor gender, possibly because, on average, both female and male students were “undecided” on the IASNL-G (Tables 1 and 2). Apparently, sexist language was not an emotional issue for them. Perhaps these effects are mediated, instead, by the degree of social identification people have with those affected by sexist language. Future studies that examine attitudes toward sexist language within the framework of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) might discover additional mediating variables. It could be the case that men who recognize themselves as part of the group depicted by sexist language are less receptive to inclusive language. Conversely, women who do not see themselves in the language might be more receptive to change.

Finally, this study strongly replicated a previous finding that attitude toward women partially mediates the gender effect on attitudes toward sexist language (Parks & Robertson, 2004). College students who were more prejudiced against women were also less receptive to inclusive language. Other studies have suggested a similar relationship (Matheson & Kristiansen, 1987; McMinn, Lindsay, Hannum, &

Troyer, 1990; McMinn, Troyer, Hannum, & Foster, 1991). Even so, attitude toward women explained only 21% of the variance in attitudes toward sexist language, suggesting that additional variables, such as group membership, need to be considered in our quest to understand differing attitudes toward sexist language.

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