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Is "He" Considered a Gender Neutral Pronoun?

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Here are two riddles:

"A man is walking down the street one day when he suddenly recognizes an old friend whom he had not seen in years walking in his direction with a little girl. They greet each other warmly and the friend says, 'I married since I last saw you, to someone you never met, and this is my daughter, Ellen.' The man says to Ellen, 'You look just like your mother.' How did he know that?

"A boy and his father were driving when suddenly a large truck careened around a corner and hit their car head-on. The car was crushed, and when their bodies were removed from the wreck the father was already dead. The son, badly injured but still alive, was rushed to the hospital, where hasty preparations were made for immediate surgery. As the boy was brought in for the operation, the surgeon saw him and said, 'I can't operate, that's my son.' How is that possible?" (Moulton, 1981, pp. 100-101).

Sexist language has only recently become an issue. It wasn't until the mid Seventies that people, mostly women, gathered together to protest against sexist language.

Else and Sanford (1987) divided the term "sexist language" into two categories. The first

category is the selecting of content, which assigns roles or characteristics on the basis of sex in ways that create and reinforce negative images of women, sex-role stereotypes, or unequal treatment of the sexes. The other category is the use of language forms and styles that excluded women, distort information about human behavior or limit perceptions of behavioral options by using masculine terms as if they were inclusive," (p. 52).

Have you solved the riddles yet? If not, carefully read them again. One would tend to think that in the first riddle the man's friend was a male and that the surgeon was also male.

The pronouns "he", "his", and "him" have always referred to a male. However, according to the usage authorities, they can also
refer to either a male or a female when the sex of the subject is unknown or applying to both sexes.

In 1850, Parliament wanted to shorten the language used in its documents. Thus, it announced that

in all acts words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females, and the singular to include the plural, and the plural the singular, unless the contrary as to gender and number is expressly provided (Evans and Evans, 1957, p. 221).

Styles and attitudes are changing, especially now in the late 1980's. Society is altering its view about many things such as marriage, family, and children. Can we include in these changes the mandate to avoid sexist language? Just how many of the people are against "he" as a gender neutral pronoun? Do they always think of a male when "he" is used generically? If they do try to avoid using "he", what do they use?

The research question that is asked is "In writing, is "he" considered a gender neutral pronoun among university students?" Writing was chosen as the focus of research rather than speaking because the use of "he" may be more controversial in writing. University students were chosen as participants because they are immersed in the generic pronoun problem every time they write a paper. "He", "his", and "him" will be used interchangeably along with "they", "theirs", and "their" and "he or she", "his or hers", and "him or her" because they are all pronouns.

By studying the use of "he" as a gender neutral pronoun, it is anticipated that the results can be used to measure the influence of the sexist pronoun controversy, and act as a guide to those who are still confused about which singular pronoun to use.

In order to gain a tighter grasp on the subject, let's review what usage authorities say about the use of "he" as a generic pronoun, and also review the studies that have been conducted dealing with "he".

The purpose of usage authorities is to describe the use of language in society. Most deal directly with controversial subjects such as this.

1) First of all, The American Heritage Dictionary (1975), considered conservative, was compiled in reaction to Webster's Third International Dictionary which was very liberal. The AHD summarizes the neutral use of "he" as representing any person whose sex is not specified (Morris, 1975, p. 606).

2) Copperud's American Usage: The Consensus (1970) summarizes the judgments of eight usage dictionaries and seven general dictionaries on various points of usage. It is stated that "it
is a well-established convention that the masculine form alone is taken as applying to both sexes," (pp. 124-125).

3) Ebbitt and Ebbitt (1982), both liberal and conservative, say that "traditionally, the masculine pronoun "he" is used with indefinite pronouns like "anyone" and "everybody" and with noun antecedents that may refer to either men or women. But feminists find this usage a prime example of sexist language," (pp. 460-461).

4) Evans and Evans (1957), a brother and sister team who are rather liberal and make extended explanations of their opinion, assert that "he" can be used for either men or women (p. 221).

5) Pollett (1966) and Bernstein (1966), who are conservatives; Bryant (1962), who extracted most of her material from original writing research; and Fowler (1927 and 1965), a British usage authority, do not address the problem of using "he" as a generic form.

6) Morris and Morris (1975), who polled a panel of conservatives for usage judgments, state that "there have been rising protests . . . against the continuation of the traditional use of 'him' and 'his' when the person referred to is unidentified as to sex." They proceed to offer some suggestions, and later resolve that the problem is unsolved (p. 298).

7) Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1973) says that "he" can be "used in a generic sense of when the sex of the person is unspecified," (p. 527).

8) Webster's New World Dictionary (1970) says that one of the definitions of "he" is "the person . . . the one, anyone," (p. 643).

9) Finally, Funk & Wagnall's Standard College Dictionary (1973) also says that "he" can be "that person, anyone, one," (p. 617).

Now, we know what the usage authorities say about the use of "he" when a person is unidentified. They say that "he" can be used as a generic pronoun. Some also recognize that there is a problem in society about using "he" in that way. Let's look at the studies that have been conducted about the use of "he", "he/she", and "they" as gender neutral pronouns.

The following is a compilation of studies which have been conducted within the last decade and inquire about the use of "he".

1) As cited in Else and Sanford (1987), Schneider and Hacker (1973) conducted a study using college students. The participants were asked to read a text and choose pictures illustrating the text. One group of subjects were given "he"/"man" terms and the other, gender-free labels (which were
2) Martyna (1978) conducted a study using twenty males and twenty females. The subjects were given forty-eight sentence fragments. Eighteen were critical elements and thirty, filler. Half of them were given orally and the other half, written. Of the eighteen critical fragments, six were male-related, six were neutral, and six were female-related. The following are examples of the sentence fragments used:

Male: Before a judge can give a final ruling, ____ must weigh the evidence.

Neutral: When a person loses money, ____ has got to feel bad.

Female: After a nurse has completed training, ____ goes to work.

The results of Martyna's study indicated that the choice of pronoun was influenced by the presumed sex of the subject regardless if the sentence was given orally or written nor if the participant was male or female. Martyna concludes that "'he' is an ambiguous term which often allows a specifically male interpretation to be drawn from an intended generic usage," (pp. 131-138).

3) Hyde (1984) conducted two experiments to determine age differences between children and their responses to sexist language. The first experiment was taken of first, third, and fifth graders, and college students. They were given four tests: 1) They had to make up a story about a person. A third of the subjects were given pronouns of "he", a third were given "they", and the last third were given "he or she". 2) They had to fill-in sentences with pronouns. 3) Sentences were read to them with pronouns and they had to say if the sentences were correct or incorrect. 4) They were asked about the gender-neutral rule of "he". Because of the results of the first experiment, Hyde concluded that "he" is not gender-neutral. Twelve percent of those given the pronoun "he" said it included females; eighteen percent of those the pronoun "they" said it included females, and forty-two percent of those given the pronouns "he or she" said it included females. Twenty-eight percent of the children knew the gender-neutral rule and eighty-four percent of the college students knew the rule.

Experiment Two was almost the same as Experiment One except that only third and fifth graders were used, the pronoun "she" was added to the story in Test One, and given an occupation, the subjects were asked to rate how well a female could perform the job on a three-point scale. In Test One (the story), when "she"
was used, seventy-seven percent said the pronoun included females. In the test about job ratings, those given the pronoun "he" gave women a low score on accomplishment, those given the pronoun "they" gave women an intermediate score on accomplishment, and those given "she" gave women a high score on accomplishment.

As a result of these experiments, Hyde asked the question: "Does sexist language produce sexist thought or does sexist thought produce sexist language?" She concluded that sexist thought produces sexist language because even when they used the pronoun "they", the children still thought of males (pp. 697-706).

4) Moulton, Robinson, and Elias (1978) researched the understanding of "he" by giving a statement to college students and having them write about it. The participants were 226 males and 264 females which were randomly assigned to six groups. They were asked to make up a story about a fictional person who fits the statement's theme. The participants were asked not to write about themselves. Three groups were given the following statement with a different pronoun ("his", "their", or "his or her") given to each group: "In a large coeducationally institution the average student will feel isolated in introductory courses." Each of the other three groups also had different pronouns and the following statement: "Each person knows when appearance is unattractive." The results were that when "his" was used, thirty-five percent wrote about females; "their", forty-six percent; and "his or her", fifty-six percent. The researchers concluded that "he" failed to be gender neutral (pp. 1032-1036).

5) Miller and Swift (1980) say that the studies confirm that in spoken usage--from the speech of young children to the conversation of university professors--"he" is rarely intended or understood to include "she". On the contrary, at all levels of education, people whose native tongue is English seem to know that "he", "him", and "his" are gender-specific and cannot do the double duty asked of them (p. 37).

As we have seen so far, Miller and Swift's opinion of "he" as a gender-specific pronoun and not a gender-neutral one remains constant. However, they do not state which studies confirm their hypothesis.

6) This final article by Cole and Hill's (1983) was the only study found to support "he" as a gender neutral pronoun. In their study entitled, "Do Masculine Pronouns Used Generically Lead to Thoughts of Men?", they conducted five experiments with a varied number of participants in each experiment: sixteen to fifty-two men and sixteen to fifty-one women. In each experiment, the participants were given job descriptions for
certain occupations such as recreation worker and secondary school teacher using "he", "they", "he/she" alternately. The first experiment used gender-oriented jobs such as mechanical engineer and flight attendant to validate semantic differences. In the following experiment, each participant was given a booklet which used only one pronoun consistently. Cole and Hill found no evidence that masculine pronouns brought thoughts of men; however, some evidence was found when "he" was used with "man". The use of the equal pronoun ("they") did not increase the subjects' tendency to think of women (p. 737-750).

Again, the research question asks "In writing, is "he" considered a generic pronoun among university students? The participants were students attending Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, during the 1988 winter semester. The students were not randomly selected. The information was taken from students in dormitories, classes, apartment complexes, and a park.

Thirty males and thirty females were asked to participate in the study. There were twelve freshmen, fourteen sophomores, seventeen juniors, fourteen seniors, and three graduate students. There were nineteen students in the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences; seven undeclared majors; four students in the College of Physical and Mathematical Sciences; five in the College of Business; eight in the College of Engineering and Technology; seven in the College of Humanities, five in the College of Biology and Agriculture; one in the College of Physical Education; three in the College of Education; and six in the College of Fine Arts and Communications. The ages ranged from seventeen to thirty with the average being 21.7 years.

The research was conducted in survey form because it can be self-administered; is easier to reach a wide population; does not take as much time as a personal interview; and if well constructed, has no interviewer effect.

Moulton, Robinson, and Elias's (1978) data collection was used as an example for this study. This survey had two parts. In Part I of the survey, the participants were asked to provide personal information such as age, sex, year in school, and major. The majors were then categorized into the various colleges. The participants were then instructed to write a paragraph about a fictional character according to the following theme: "At Brigham Young University, a new student can feel alone during (his, his or her, their) first semester." One-third of the forms had "his first semester"; one-third, "his or her first semester", and one-third, "their first semester".

After the participants finished Part I, they were each given Part II and were asked to answer "yes" or "no" to the following question: "Did you know that "he" could be used as a generic pronoun referring to both male and female?"
After conducting the survey, a chi-square test of significance was used to determine the chances of the results being correct, or whether or not they were significant. A ninety-five percent confidence level was used for the test. There were varying degrees of freedom and varying chi-square values which were needed for the hypothesis to be significant.

The main questions about the survey were . . .

1) Did the writing of male or female depend on the given of "his", "his/her", and "their"?

Four supplementary questions about the survey were . . .

2) Did the knowledge of "he" as a gender neutral pronoun depend on the sex?

3) Did the knowledge of "he" as a gender neutral pronoun depend on year in school?

4) Did the knowledge of "he" as a gender neutral pronoun depend on major?

5) Did the writing of male or female depend on the sex?

QUESTION ONE: Did the writing of male or female depend on the given of "his", "his/her", and "their"?

The results of Question One are summarized in Table One:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>He</th>
<th>She</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>His</td>
<td>15/75%</td>
<td>5/25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their</td>
<td>13/65%</td>
<td>7/35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His or Her</td>
<td>11/55%</td>
<td>9/45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table One, when given "he", seventy-five percent wrote about a male and twenty-five percent wrote about a female. When given "their", sixty-five percent wrote about a male and thirty-five percent wrote about a female. When given "his or her", fifty-five percent wrote about a male and forty-five percent wrote about a female. It seems that the pronouns were not equally distributed among the categories. In addition, "he" was more often thought of as a male than "their" or "his or her". It also can be concluded that when "his or her" was given, people thought almost equally about males and females. Maybe this can reflect the influence of the sexist pronoun controversy.

In the statistical analysis of Question One, a ninety-five percent confidence level and two degrees of freedom were used. Because the chi-square value needed to be greater than 6.0 and the actual value was 1.758, no conclusion could be made. It
could not be statistically determined that the writing of male or female depended on the given of "his", "his or her", and "their".

Because this survey was modeled after the one in Moulton, Robinson, and Elias (1978), it was speculated that maybe the results of this survey could be significantly similar to the ones of Moulton et al. Therefore, a large sample test of a population proportion was conducted. Each of the percentages of "his", "their", and "his or her" of this survey were compared with those of Moulton et al.'s survey. The hypothesis would be rejected if the z score was greater than 1.96 or less than -1.96. The z score of "his" was -0.937. The z scores of "his or her" and "their" were -1.03. Therefore, the hypothesis was not proved incorrect. Maybe we can assume to be true that the results of this survey were similar to the ones of Moulton, et al.

QUESTION TWO: Did the knowledge of "he" as a gender neutral pronoun depend on the sex?

The results of Question Two are summarized in Table Two:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28/93%</td>
<td>2/6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21/70%</td>
<td>9/30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table Two, ninety-three percent of the females said "yes" that they understood that "he" could be used as a generic pronoun and six percent of the females said "no". Seventy percent of the males said "yes" and thirty percent said "no". It seems that more females had a understanding that "he" could be used as a generic pronoun.

In the statistical analysis of Question Two, a ninety-five percent confidence level and one degree of freedom were used. The chi-square value needed to be greater than 3.84 and the outcome was 5.454. Thus, we can be ninety-five percent confident that knowledge of "he" as a gender neutral pronoun depended on the sex.

QUESTION THREE: Did the knowledge of "he" as a gender neutral pronoun depend on year in school?

The results of Question Three are summarized in Table Three:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>8/73%</td>
<td>3/27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>12/80%</td>
<td>3/20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>12/80%</td>
<td>3/20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>14/88%</td>
<td>2/12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>3/100%</td>
<td>0/00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Table Three, seventy-three percent of the freshmen said "yes" that they understood that "he" could be used as a generic pronoun and twenty-seven percent said "no". Eighty percent of the sophomores said "yes" and twenty percent said "no". Eighty percent of the juniors said "yes" and twenty percent said "no". Eighty-eight percent of the seniors said "yes" and twelve percent said "no". One hundred percent of the graduates said "yes". It seems that the higher the year in school, the more likely one understood that "he" could be used as a generic pronoun.

In the statistical analysis of Question Three, a ninety-five percent confidence level and four degrees of freedom were used. Because the chi-square value needed to be greater than 9.50 and the actual value was 1.672, no conclusion could be made that the understanding of "he" as a generic pronoun depended on year in school.

QUESTION FOUR: Did the knowledge of "he" as gender neutral pronoun depend on major?

The results of Question Four are summarized in Table Four:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engineering and Technology</td>
<td>6/60%</td>
<td>2/40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>4/67%</td>
<td>2/33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Arts and Communications</td>
<td>6/75%</td>
<td>2/25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology and Agriculture</td>
<td>3/75%</td>
<td>1/25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and Mathematical Sciences</td>
<td>4/80%</td>
<td>1/20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family, Home, and Social Sciences</td>
<td>12/86%</td>
<td>2/14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undeclared</td>
<td>6/86%</td>
<td>1/14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law School</td>
<td>1/100%</td>
<td>0/00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td>1/100%</td>
<td>0/00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3/100%</td>
<td>0/00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>6/100%</td>
<td>0/00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table Four, sixty percent of those in engineering and technology said "yes" that they understood that "he" could be used as a generic pronoun and forty percent said "no". Sixty-seven percent of those in business said "yes" and thirty-three percent said "no". Seventy-five percent of those in fine arts and communications and those in biology and agriculture said "yes" and twenty-five percent said "no". Eighty percent of those in physical and mathematical sciences said "yes" and twenty percent said "no". Eighty-six percent of those in family, home, and social sciences and those with no declared majors said "yes" and fourteen percent said "no". One hundred percent of those in law school, physical education, education, and humanities said "yes". It seems that those majors in education and humanities were more aware that "he" could be used as a generic pronoun.
In the statistical analysis of Question Four, a ninety-five percent confidence level and ten degrees of freedom were used. Because the chi-square value needed to be greater than 18.30 and the actual value was 5.509, no conclusion could be made that knowledge of "he" as a generic pronoun depended on major.

QUESTION FIVE: Did the writing of male or female depend on the sex?

The results of Question Five are summarized in Table Five:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>He</th>
<th>She</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27/90%</td>
<td>3/10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12/40%</td>
<td>18/60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table Five, ninety percent of the males wrote "he" and ten percent wrote "she". Forty percent of the females wrote "he" and sixty percent wrote "she". It seems that the writing of male or female depended on sex. It also seems that more females were inclined to write about a male than males were to write about a female.

In the statistical analysis of Question Five, a ninety-five percent confidence level and one degree of freedom were used. The chi-square value needed to be greater than 3.84 and the outcome value was 16.484. Thus, we can be ninety-five percent confident that the writing of male or female depended on the sex.

The following is a summary of the survey results of the five questions:

1) Did the writing of male or female depend on the given of "his", "his/her", and "their"? No, it could not be statistically determined that the writing of male or female depended on the given of "his", "his or her", and "their". However, we may be able to assume that the survey results are statistically similar to those of Moulton, Robinson, and Elias (1978).

2) Did the knowledge of "he" as a gender neutral pronoun depend on the sex? Yes, we can be ninety-five percent confident that knowledge of "he" as a generic pronoun depended on the sex.

3) Did the knowledge of "he" as a gender neutral pronoun depend on year in school? No, no conclusion could be made that the understanding of "he" as a generic pronoun depended on year in school.

4) Did the knowledge of "he" as a generic pronoun depend on
major? No, no conclusion could be made that knowledge of "he" as a generic pronoun depended on major.

5) Did the writing of male or female depend on the sex? Yes, we can be ninety-five percent confident that the writing of male or female depended on the sex.

The outcome of the statistics for Question One were surprising because almost all of the other research conducted and summarized in the review of literature supported that "he" is thought of as a generic pronoun. It was expected that the survey results from Question One would be significant. However, it is believed that if a random sample was taken and a larger sample of each category (such as thirty males and thirty females for each "his", "their", and "his or her") the results may have been significant.

The results of this survey should not be considered definite because no random sample was taken and the categories were too small. In spite of this, because of the large sample test of population proportion, we can assume that the survey results support those of Moulton, et al. (1978), and that "he" is most often thought of including only males and is not a generic pronoun.

Now, for those people who feel they may a problem with using "he" as a generic pronoun, many of the cited studies offer suggestions of how to avoid using "he":

1) First of all, Miller and Swift (1980), Frank and Anshen (1983), Morris and Morris (1975), Ebbitt and Ebbitt (1982), and Shear (1981) suggest using "he or she". However, Copperud (1970) and Archibald (1970) believe that "he or she" is too clumsy.

2) Miller and Swift (1980) and Ebbitt and Ebbitt (1982) say that "he/she" or "s/he" would be all right too.

3) Also, Miller and Swift (1980), Frank and Anshen (1983), Ebbitt and Ebbitt (1982), Copperud (1970), Archibald (1978), Evans and Evans (1957), and Bernstein (1977) advocate the use of the plural pronouns "they" or "their" even after a singular antecedent such as "everyone", "everybody", "someone", and "somebody". There is one opponent to this usage: Copperud (1979) who himself contradicts his recommendation of "they" in 1970.

4) Miller and Swift (1980) and Frank and Anshen (1983) suggest using "she" as the generic pronoun.

5) Another suggestion was made by Morris and Morris (1975) and Shear (1981) to use "one" instead of "he".

6) Pluralizing is a good way of avoiding the neutral pronoun. Then no one realizes that writers have a problem with sex fairness (Miller and Swift, 1980; Frank and Anshen, 1983; Shear, 1981; and Nielsen, 1984).
7) Some authors as cited in Frank and Anshen (1983), and Miller and Swift (1980), have introduced new pronouns which are nonsexist. In the 1800's, Charles Converse proposed the use of "thon" (that one). It was in the dictionaries until the 1950's. Other such proposed pronouns include "co", "E", "tey", and "hesh". June Arnold used "na" in The Cook and the Carpenter. Marge Piercy used "pa" for a short form of person in Woman on the Edge of Time. Ray A. Killian, author of Managers Must Lead! used "hir".

8) Finally writers must above all be consistent while using the pronoun forms (Nielsen, 1984; Shear, 1981).


Joni M. Kroepelin
Brigham Young University

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY SURVEY
PART I

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Age____

Sex____

Year in school_____________

Major____________________

INSTRUCTIONS: Write a paragraph of a fictional character according to the following theme. PLEASE DO NOT WRITE ABOUT YOURSELF.

THEME: At Brigham Young University, a new student can feel alone during his or her first semester.
PERSONAL INFORMATION:
Age____
Sex____
Year in school_____________
Major___________________

INSTRUCTIONS: Write a paragraph of a fictional character according to the following theme. PLEASE DO NOT WRITE ABOUT YOURSELF.

THEME: At Brigham Young University, a new student can feel alone during his first semester.
PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Age _____

Sex _____

Year in school ________________

Major ________________________

INSTRUCTIONS: Write a paragraph of a fictional character according to the following theme. PLEASE DO NOT WRITE ABOUT YOURSELF.

THEME: At Brigham Young University, a new student can feel alone during their first semester.
ANSWER: Did you know that "he" could be used as a generic pronoun referring to both male and female?