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Gender-Neutral Language Policy at the Student Research Journal

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About Author

Ben earned a B.A. in European History from California State University, Fresno in 2013 and an M.A. in Modern European History from SJSU in 2018. He started his Master of Library and Information Science degree program in the spring of 2021 and has a focus in web programming and information architecture. In that time, he has been working as an intern for the University of Michigan as a researcher and librarian on a platform called 1cademy. Beyond his studies, Ben enjoys fly fishing and reading science fiction novels.

In the Fall of 2022, the Student Research Journal (SRJ) added a new gender-neutral language policy. This policy included a proposal for several changes to the training and rubrics used by editors. It was researched, written, and proposed by the managing editor, Benjamin Brown. This policy reflects a culture of inclusivity and accessibility that the SRJ espouses and also provides a good example of how similar policies could be adopted in other organizations. This paper provides some background on why this policy was pursued, describes how the policy was drafted, and how it was accepted and implemented. Finally, this paper will discuss how this type of work can be easily replicated in other similar organizations, including why this would be desirable.

An individual's identified gender is often an important, even fundamental component of their identity. Failing to acknowledge and respect an individual's identified gender can lead to frustration, distress, or alienation. Inclusivity stands as a crucial characteristic of San José State University (SJSU) and, consequently, SRJ. Moreover, gendered language poses a threat to SRJ's goals and operations. Mistreating the gender identities of the editorial team, authors, or readers could disrupt journal production and present obstacles to SJR's goals. While this paper focuses on the development of a gender-neutral language proposal for SRJ, it is worth considering how other organizations can adopt a similar policy and ensure the use of gender-neutral language.

Background

To inform this proposal, literature on the use of gender-neutral language was consulted and evaluated. It was important to see how other organizations approached the issue and how they attempted to ameliorate it. In the case of SRJ, three types of stakeholders were considered in developing this policy. The goal was to tailor the guidelines used by other organizations to the unique operations of SRJ.

Literature Overview

The use of gender-neutral language is not new and has been slowly adopted by many individuals and organizations over the years. There are many different interpretations or guidelines for the use of gender-neutral language that have been developed. The policy adopted by SRJ drew on existing guidelines from the United Nations (UN), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

While there is a lot of nuance to providing guidelines on gender-neutral language, there are some general principles that are universally accepted and suggested by various sources. Pronouns are discussed by the UN, APA, and NCTE. UN suggests avoiding gendered pronouns, but APA and NCTE more explicitly state that by default "they" should be used as a singular pronoun for individuals when their identified pronouns are unknown. This approach has gained a lot of traction in recent years and is included in guidelines provided by both the Associated Press's (AP) guidelines (Easton, 2017) and the American Library Association's (ALA) author guide (American Library Association, 2020). APA, NCTE, and ALA also suggest that if an identified pronoun is known then it should be used.

Another important guideline frequently presented is that expressions that enforce cultural expectations or stereotypes about gender should not be used. This is supported by the UN, APA, and NCTE. While the UN literature discusses avoiding expressions in a gender binary context, APA and NCTE extend this to a gender plural context and go further to suggest avoiding language that implies gender as a binary phenomenon. The UN also suggests that gender not be discussed unless it is relevant. The approach described in APA is perhaps more useful. They make the point that if gender or sex is discussed, the author needs to ensure they are defining either correctly, and they are addressing them appropriately by that definition.

Stakeholders

The three main stakeholders that were considered in designing this policy are the editors, authors, and readers. These individuals are worth considering because they play important roles in the production of the journal and because the journal is intended to provide them with learning and development opportunities. The deleterious effect of gendered language could be disruptive to both. It is important to understand all these stakeholders in the context of how they interact with SRJ.

Editorial Team

The editorial team is a diverse group of students that have chosen to contribute to the journal and learn more about publishing and the LIS field. SJSU's iSchool includes students from across the US (and other countries), this means that editors that join SRJ come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Due to the limited time to serve as an editor, it is common to have a lot of yearly turnover. This means that members need to adjust to new editors, and they need to cooperate in a short time frame. The use of gender-neutral language among the team cannot guarantee that the team will get along or cooperate, however, it can eliminate a potential source of frustration and exclusion.

Authors

SRJ relies on the volunteered writing and time of authors. Yes, authors are asking SRJ to publish their work, but it is important to remember that if authors do not want to offer their work or engage in the peer-review process, then SRJ has nothing to publish. Every member of the editorial team has either direct or indirect contact with the author. The editor-in-chief (EIC) communicates directly through emails. The managing editor (ME) communicates with the author through their remarks on the Consolidated Referee Report (CRR). The editorial team also communicates indirectly with the author through their remarks on their rubrics which are given to the author in the CRR. All of these are ways in which gendered language can affect an author's continued participation in the peer-review process. Moreover, it is a major goal of SRJ to provide students with exposure to publishing and peer review. Once again, gendered language could serve as a barrier to this goal by dissuading authors from participating in peer-review.

Readers

SRJ is a journal and exists to serve its readers. Since May 2022, 20,503 SRJ articles have been downloaded in 156 countries (BePress retrieved 5/24/23). Just like the students of SJSU who comprise the editorial team, the readership of SRJ is diverse. The treatment of gender in the content of what is written in SRJ (whether it be improper pronouns or inappropriate expressions) could upset or alienate readers. Furthermore, as previously stated, the APA publication manual outlines the use of gender-neutral language. This is important because the SRJ format and content page (https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/ischoolsrj/styleguide.html) asks authors to adhere to the APA guidelines. The ALA author guide also suggests the use of "they" as a gender-neutral pronoun (ALA, 2020). As a journal that discusses library and information science topics, adherence to gender-neutral language, as outlined by the ALA, helps guarantee that the writing meets the expectation of its readers.

Goals

The policy and proposal were drafted during the summer of 2022 in collaboration with the editor-in-chief, Amber Passey. It was then sent to the editorial team for review at the beginning of the Fall semester in August and voted on in the first editorial team meeting the same month. It was unanimously accepted. The proposal contained several things including a policy to be placed on the policy page of the SRJ's website (https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/ischoolsrj/policies.html), a change to the EIC and ME training, and a change to the editor's rubrics. Before going over these changes, it is worth discussing the specific goals that they were designed to produce.

As previously stated, the goal of this proposal was to ensure that gendered language did not disrupt the three main stakeholders. Specifically, the proposal was planned to address three types of communication that occur among the stakeholders: between the editorial team, between editors and authors, and in published work.

Communication Among Editors

The governing rule for gender-neutral communication among the editorial team is that editors use their colleagues' identified pronouns if they are known. SJSU student profiles on Canvas allow them to select identified pronouns. By accessing the "People" tab of SRJ on Canvas, editors can see the names and identified pronouns of their fellow editors. They should use this to acquaint themselves with their peers' identified pronouns and use them. If an identified pronoun is not known then "they/theirs" can be used, however, it would be best to simply use the person's name. In meetings at the beginning of the semester or when new editors join and there are introductions, leadership roles (editor-in-chief and managing editor) should provide their identified pronouns in their own introductions to encourage others to do so as well. This will hopefully encourage fellow editors to share identified pronouns without putting everyone on the spot by asking them to identify in front of the group (many of whom they may not know).

Communication with Authors

Editorial team members should use the pronouns "they/theirs" or say "the author" or "the reviewer" (in the case of book reviews) when talking about the manuscript or the author of the work being reviewed. By the nature of the double-blind, peer-review process, the author is unknown to all editorial team members except for the EIC and ME. Their pronouns or name will not be known to content and copy editors. While the copy and content editors may not directly communicate with the author, their remarks on the rubric are read by the author, so the language in rubrics must be gender-neutral. The author's name is known to both the EIC and ME, but they will likely not know the identified pronouns of the author. While the third-person pronouns "they/theirs" or saying "the author/the reviewer" is appropriate for the ME because their communication is more indirect, second-person pronouns, "you/yours" work as well. In particular, the EIC should use "you/yours" because they communicate directly with the author through email.

Language in Published Content

Chapter five section five of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2010) should be consulted and used to edit manuscripts and ensure that published manuscripts use gender-neutral language. It was suggested that the language and grammar section of the rubric for copy editors and the voice section of the content editors' rubric include gender-neutral language as specified by APA (2010). They should ensure the usage of appropriate pronouns or "they/theirs" in lieu of known identified pronouns. In particular, editors should suggest changing pronouns used by the author to describe someone to "they/theirs" if they cannot verify identified pronouns. They should also ensure that writing does not contain gendered expressions or implied binary genders. They should check that "sex" and "gender" are used appropriately based on their definition. Finally, they should ensure that appropriate terms pertaining to sex, gender, and gender identity are used.

Proposal

The proposal addressed the three contexts where gender-neutral language needs to be implemented. In total, this proposal included a policy statement for SRJ, amendments to the copy editor rubrics, and new content in the EIC and ME training material on Canvas.

Policy

The policy itself was drafted to state the goal of ensuring gender-neutral language. It was added to the SRJ policies page which serves more than a cosmetic purpose. This page contains important information for submitting authors and, in theory, should encourage them to adopt gender-neutral language in their manuscripts. It is also a page that new editors must view as part of their training and could prevent the use of gendered language between editors. The policy is as follows:

> SRJ requires the use of gender-neutral language for communication among the editorial team, between the editorial team and submitting authors, and in its publications. Editorial team members should use the identified pronouns, the names, or the pronouns "they/theirs" when communicating

with their colleagues. In CRRs and rubrics, editorial team members should use the pronouns "they/theirs," or say "the author" or "the reviewer" (for book reviews) when discussing the author or their work. The content of manuscripts should be reviewed against the APA's publication manual (2010) guidelines for gender-neutral language discussed in chapter five, section five.

Rubrics

The rubrics used by copy editors have been amended to specify that editors review manuscripts for gender-neutral language. The copy-editor rubric currently asks readers to consider APA's guidelines on bias in the language and grammar section, but this has been elaborated further to specify checking against section 5.5 (American Psychological Association, 2010, 138). An example of the amended rubric can be viewed here.

Criteria Description	Rating 1 - 5	Comments
References Reference list includes a minimum of 10 scholarly sources (check Ulrichs for periodicals). DOIs, URIs and URLs are verifiable. https://apps.crossref.org/SimpleTextQuery and doi.org are good resources for locating hyperlinked DOIs.		
Language & Grammar Correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling, reflecting advanced scholarly competency. Diction is formal, precise, and economic. Terminology is relevant to the field. Applies writing conventions as per APA (e.g., avoiding bias, linguistic devices) and uses gender-neutral language (APA 5.5). Manuscript is edited to scholarly standard before submission		
Execution Author employs a consistent, scholarly voice throughout. Statements are clear. Paragraphs are well-structured and sentences provide logical flow. Direct quotations are used sparingly, and author's writing is at the forefront		

EIC/ME Training

To promote the use of gender-neutral language among the editorial team, a statement was added suggesting the EIC and ME introduce themselves and their identified pronouns. This is done at the first meeting of each semester or when there are introductions resulting from a new member of the editorial staff. This encourages other members of the editorial team to share their identified pronouns and use the identified pronouns of others. This also prevents anyone from being made uncomfortable by being directly asked to share.

Adoption and Use Elsewhere

This proposal was intended to ensure that SRJ continues to serve its stakeholders without disruption or conflict arising out of gendered language. It was important to provide a proposal that was actionable and took tangible steps to prevent gendered language rather than just a statement saying that gendered language is undesirable. The creation and adoption of this policy and other items in the proposal were the product of evaluating existing policies, and expectations in the field, and analyzing risks within the context of SRJ operations.

The process and steps taken by SRJ could be easily replicated elsewhere. In the case of SRJ, this started as an assessment of risks posed by gendered language. By looking at the stakeholders and how they communicate it was clear that due to their lack of knowing each other, there was room for miscommunication and gendered language to disrupt operations. Next, a review of the literature on the subject laid out a clear set of goals for communication between the stakeholders. Finally, the proposal was developed around knowing the goals and looking at how they could be achieved based on how stakeholders interacted in the editorial process. While it required some research and consideration of SRJ operations, it was not a challenging process to create a proposal. For the cost of a relatively small amount of work, the benefit is that there are much lower risks of gendered language disrupting our editors' work or alienating authors and readers. A similar policy and proposal would need to be adapted to the nuances of a different organization but would probably not be much more challenging. The payoff is a more inclusive organization with a lower risk of conflict resulting from the mistreatment of gender identity.

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