

“HE” IS NOT A GENDER NEUTRAL PRONOUN

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My education in English medium schools during the 1980s led me to unconsciously believe that “he” and “him” are gender neutral third person singular pronouns. Our history books in middle school taught us about “Early Man” – how he learnt to use fire, how he invented the wheel, and how he domesticated animals (surely there were an equal number of Early Women, but that thought never struck me at the time). Everything I read outside school – books authored by Enid Blyton or Agatha Christie, English classics, or mid-20th century novels - reinforced gender stereotypes, and freely used “him/he” to discuss an unknown third person.

It was only when I moved to the United States at the beginning of the 21st century that I first heard and read the terms “he or she”, “he/she”, or “s/he” used to talk or write about a third person in gender unbiased terms. I also came across the ingenious use of “they” as a singular pronoun for genderqueer or third gender individuals. It was initially difficult to remember to be politically correct, but the importance of these cumbersome terms was not lost on me. It became apparent that the native English speaking West had recognized the gender bias inherent in their language, and were now at pains to correct it.

During my time abroad, I started reading and thinking about gender bias in academia. I came across studies which reported that the number of women PhD graduates in biomedical sciences in the US/Europe were roughly equal to the number of men, but only 15-30% faculty were women (1, 2, 3). The reasons for this ‘leaky pipeline’ are many (1), but it was wonderful to witness these discussions, and know that the scientific community wanted to do something to fix this.



Upon starting my own research group in India, I carried these thoughts with me. I was now in the habit of always using gender unbiased terms in my conversation. For instance, I would say “I think this referee does not understand the point we are trying to make – he or she has not read this part of the text carefully”. My students quickly and subconsciously picked up this habit – they now correct me by

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interjecting a “he or she” into my sentence if I ever slip up! I am so sensitized now that I find the generic use of ‘he’ to be quite jarring. For example, it would strike me as odd if someone would say “Every faculty member should be allowed a student of his choice, and every student should also be permitted to join a lab he chooses”.

More recently, I have been reading about the backlash against this political correctness in the West (4) and wondered if I was taking my own bias towards the use of gender-neutral terms too far. Did I judge others to be biased if they used “he” instead of “he/she”? My conclusions from this introspection are that the use of gender-biased pronouns does not necessarily mean that the person in question is biased against women, and conversely, being politically correct does not always indicate that the speaker is free from bias.

However, I still strongly advocate against the use of “he/him” when talking about a generic third person. It has now been proven that unconscious gender bias is hurting the careers of women in STEM fields (5). We should do all we can to correct this imbalance. The Unconscious Bias Observer Scheme practiced during staff recruitment at the Department of Chemistry, University of York, is an outstanding effort to promote equality and diversity in academia (6).

As highly educated individuals engaged in an intellectual profession, all of us should make a conscious effort to use gender unbiased terms in our everyday speech and in our writing. If the current NCERT history textbook for Class VI can use the term “Early People”, why can’t all of us start referring to our students, post-docs and faculty

as “they” instead of “he”? Tolstoy said “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself” (7). Let us heed a rephrased version of this thought: “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing **themselves**”! (8)

1. Leboy P. Fixing the leaky pipeline. (2008) The Scientist Magazine.
2. Martinez E.D. et al. Falling off the academic bandwagon. (2007) EMBO Reports 8, 977-981
3. Ledin A, et al. A persistent problem. Traditional gender roles hold back female scientists. EMBO reports (2007) 8, 982-987.
4. Political correctness gone mad? (2018) by Jordan B. Peterson, Michael Eric Dyson, Michelle Goldberg, and Stephen Fry. Oneworld Publications
5. C. A. Moss-Racusin et al. Science faculty's subtle gender biases favor male students. PNAS, 2012, 109(41), 16474-16479.
6. <https://www.york.ac.uk/chemistry/ed/resource-hub/unconscious-bias-scheme/>
7. Tolstoy L. “Three Methods Of Reform” in Pamphlets: Translated from the Russian (1900) as translated by Aylmer Maude, p. 29.
8. The third person singular pronoun ‘themselves’, is increasingly being used instead of ‘himself’ or ‘herself’ to refer to a person of unspecified sex.