

A Study on Anti-male Bias in Language

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Abstract

In recent years, the research of discrimination against females has become a hot topic. However, the truth is that some males are also under prejudice whilst the study of anti-male bias is quite limited. Hence, this paper intends to study the phenomenon of anti-male bias in language. First, within the framework of Eugene August's classification, a research was conducted from gender-exclusive language, gender-restrictive language and negative stereotyping about males with examples. In addition, the causes of discrimination were analyzed from historical, social, cultural and media perspectives. Finally, some suggestions were given in the hope of reducing anti-male bias in expressions.

Keywords: anti-male bias in words, gender-exclusive language, negative stereotyping, gender-restrictive language

1. Introduction

With the progress of the society and the development of the feminist movement, the research of discrimination against females in words has attracted a growing number of scholars, while the field of anti-male bias in words has been paid a little attention. Few researchers study the words against males on the ground that people “take it for granted that it is unnecessary to consider such questions” (Hudson, 2000).

There is no doubt that the study on the anti-male bias in words has been overlooked to a great extent. Therefore, the paper intends to raise three questions: (1) What are the types of anti-male bias in words? (2) Why does the phenomenon of anti-male bias in words exist? (3) How to reduce anti-male bias in words? The paper is expected to make people aware of the adverse effect of discriminatory words against males and decrease the use of it.

2. Previous Studies of Anti-male Bias in Words

Until the late 1980s, the studies of males discrimination has come into visions as a new topic. Margaret Mead, cultural anthropologist and writer, clearly disproves of the view of “male conspiracy to keep women in their place” (Margaret, pp. 298-300). Likewise, with regard to the anti-male bias in words, some researches show that both males and females are victims of stereotypes in certain social cultures. The only difference is that males are as often as not the direct victims of “subtle sexism”.

For the past few years, some researchers analyzed the linguistic discrimination by comparing females and males. On the one hand, females have been aware of the importance of words gradually, and have been in the brave pursuit of their equality in words; on the other hand, males suffer from the bias in words but rarely speak out due to shame (Bai, 2015). Others discussed anti-male bias in words from different angles, such as “questioning masculinity”, “the initiator of crime and evil”, “males and bad habits”, “males and sex”, “males and animals”, as well as “the defamatory names to males occupations” (Yin, 2007; Xu & Yin, 2008; Jiang, 2014). Still others study this topic according to Eugene August’s classification, reminding people of an indisputable fact that males are under discrimination in words (Shi, 2003; Zhang, 2005; Zhou, 2009).

The term “anti-male bias” derives from Eugene August’s article, entitled “Real Men Don’t: Anti-Male Bias in English”. In the article, it refers to some expressions or concepts adverse to males. That is to say, it is characterized by hostility or discrimination toward males. In the meanwhile, Eugene proposes the classification of anti-male bias, including gender-exclusive language, gender-restrictive language and negative stereotyping respectively. Based on the inspiration of the previous studies, this paper intends to answer the questions mentioned before within the framework of August.

3. Analysis of Anti-male Bias in Words

3.1 Gender-exclusive Language

“Gender-exclusive language” is characterized by the exclusion of males from a certain concept. Roughly speaking, there are two situations in which males are generally excluded.

The first one is that some words or phrases with good meanings have nothing to do with males. For instance, our first tongue is called “mother tongue” in English and in many other languages but “there are no father tongue” (Ong, 1981, p. 36). Similarly, some phrases, such as “mother land”, “mother earth”, “mother nature”, and “Mother of States” (a nickname for the state of Virginia) are often adopted to express a sense of belonging and attachment. It must be admitted that women have fulfilled great childbearing and rearing responsibility. However, fathers also play an invaluable role in enlightening and educating children. Besides, some expressions like “mother oil”, “mother lode”, “mother wit”, “mother of invention” creep into our ears every now and then, which are obviously not connected with males.

The second one is that males are not seen as the victims of domestic violence or war. When it comes to the domestic violence, people tend to think of violence against females. Some of them fail to make a distinction between right and wrong, blame males in anger, and sigh “wife abuse”. Yet the truth is that males can also be reduced to victims, but the cases are much less likely to report. According to a survey by the Centers for Disease Control, around 40% of males have been abused by their intimate partners. And the number of males estimated to be assaulted by their spouses reaches to 835,000 every year. Even those who call emergency call for help suffers from high rates of severe violence from their wives, not to mention how many males in the gay group who are frequently reluctant to seek help out of shame are abused. Thus, they are continually victimized.

As for war, females and children are often regarded to be innocent and vulnerable rather than males. According to the news, the Bush administration’s war on Iraq was the “murder of innocent women and children” (qtd. in Bai, p.199). As a matter of fact, males also eat the bitter fruits of brutal war. Some of them who are in supportive of peace become destitute and homeless. Some forced to leave for the front-line fall into victims under enemies’ weapons. Still some endure the pain of disabilities caused by war, so males are also victims of the war.

3.2 Gender-restrictive Language

Human society has always placed the gender in their defined social roles. Males and females are expected to have their corresponding characteristics. The biggest disadvantage of such expectation is more likely to confine other possibilities of their behavior. In some people’s opinion, asking for help when males can do it themselves is perceived as a sign of weakness. Under this circumstance, males are required to grow up following certain gender roles. Otherwise, anti-male bias in words come after it.

In childhood, boys are always taught that “you are a boy”, “boys don’t cry”, and “you must be manly” etc. A short film “Boys Don’t Cry”, produced by White Ribbon, draws people’s attention to the impact of stereotypes on boys. The boy in the film is always told to “be brave” and “be a big boy” as he encounters unhappy things and vents his emotions. In other words, they are supposed to have the characteristics of toughness, athleticism and never backing down. If a boy’s behavior is not considered to be “manly”, he would be perhaps called “weak sister”, “mama’s boy”, “milksoy”, “cream puff”, “Nancy boy”, “weenie”, etc.

In adulthood, males are expected to be “real men”. At any time, this kind of masculinity must be showed up, otherwise they are probably ridiculed. Some time ago, after blockbuster *The Founding of an Army* released, Qu Hao, a young pop idol to star Communist general Ye Ting, is criticized to be too sissy. The incident has caused a stir on the Internet. Some people publicly state that such “effeminate celebrities” set a quite bad model for the young generation. There is even such comment that “sissy youngsters will lead to a sissy country”. In reality, if a male uses grooming products, holds a parasol, has double-fold eyelids and fair skin, he may be considered as a “priss” or “a traitor to his gender”.

If a male who falls in love fails to show his gentlemanly manner, he maybe mocked as “savage”, “boor”, “andro-centrism”, and “straight man cancer” (to describe those males who are indifferent to sensitivity). Sometimes, males are even compared to animals, such as “louse”, “rat”, “wolf”, “pig”, etc. Furthermore, if a male is a gay, he might be “abnormal” in the eyes of others, and insulted as “faggot”, “bugger”, “pervert”, “deviant” and so on.

After the marriage, males bear the burden of supporting their families. Typically, he has to go all out because many people believe that the value of a male comes from a successful career. In case they fail to meet this requirement, some of them may sadly risk of being humiliated. In such situation, their partners perhaps find faults with them, and blame them as a “loser”, “free-loader”, “deadbeat”, “parasite”, “good-for-nothing”, and “never-do-well” (Zhou, 2009, p. 52). It seems that regardless of whether males agree or not, it can be seen that society expects their roles to be “winners”, “heroes”, “self-reliant males” and “responsible fathers”.

3.3 Negative Stereotyping of Males

“Negative stereotyping” refers to some negative expressions about males’ behaviors in words, which has long been rooted in people’s minds. What people usually think of is the “masculinization of evil”. That is, people tend to associate sins with males. Eugene once conducted an experiment. The participants invited were asked to classify the words such as “murderer”, “crook”, “criminal”, “thief”, “killer”, “gangster”, “desperado”, “thug” and “mobster” under the three scales of “mainly referring to males”, “mainly referring to females” and “both can be”. The final statistics shows that most participants linked these words of sins to males. Similar situations can be discovered in *The Women’s Room*, Marilyn French’s best-selling novel. In her point of view, males are rapists, raping females with their eyes, laws and codes, etc. Obviously, the idea equal all males to rapists is filled with the prejudice.

What’s more, people have different attitudes towards homeless and ragged males and females. For example, people often have sympathy for females’ situation. And those homeless females are often called “lady hermits”, “shopping-bag ladies”, “peculiar populace of lone and homeless women” and “down but not out”. On the contrary, if a male is a “vagabond”, he may get a comment that “he must be a lazy bum” and “there is no need to give the vagrant something”. It cannot be denied that some homeless males pretend to be vagabonds to make a fortune, whereas some become homeless and beg for a variety of reasons such as bankruptcy, disability, weakness and old age.

Moreover, males are frequently criticized by drinking alcohol. Both males and females drink to relieve their worries after getting off work, or strengthen their relationship, or stay in their isolated and mistrustful world. Yet many males are labeled as a “drunkard”, “tank”, “beer belly”, “inebriate”, “unhealthy appetite for alcohol”. In addition, if a person get boozy, he is called “drunk as a lord”, instead of “drunk as a lady” (Shi, 2003, p. 117).

4. The Causes of Anti-male Bias in Words

The historical factor should be taken into account above all. With the development of social productive forces, human society has a social division of labor. It has led to the difference in social status, which can be traced back to the roles played by males and females in the Prehistoric Era. At that time, males hunted animals and females gathered food in general. Little by little, males have been given more duties and expectations. This kind of view has been strengthened in agricultural and industrial society. As a result, people has a long-term stereotyping of males. Males have been inspired by the notion of physical masculinity that “bigger arms make a better man”. Males should have tight abs, go to work outside to support their families and gain fame and fortune. Therefore, if they fail to do something as expected, they are reproached to be “rebellious”, “indifferent”, “niang (sissy)”, “prodigal” and “hooligan”. Hence, anti-male bias in words arises gradually.

Second, social factors should also be considered. Some females have dissatisfied with their roles and social status. Therefore, they have been in brave pursuit of their rights. The feminist movement shows the social progress. However, some feminists and their supporters take it too far. They use radical words on purpose to accuse males of “oppressors”, “perpetrators”, or “executioners”. As a result, some swearing words seem to remind people of the negative image of males.

Meanwhile, the cultural factor makes difference to some extent. As mentioned above, people sometimes link males to the evil. This kind of stereotype derives from the *Bible*, in which Satan is the head of all demons. He turns into a serpent and lures Adam and Eve to eat the fig. Humans committed the original sin finally. Once males are blamed, they are remarked as “Devil Satan”. And “evil” sometimes is equal to “he”, rather than “she”. As a consequence, when some evil events occur, people tend to connect them with males.

Last but not least, the media have also played a part. To attract audience’ attention, some media are extremely irresponsible and provoke gender conflict by design. There are lots of demeaning comments about males flooding on the media platform. For example, “males are as slippery as an eel”, “males cease to be faithful once they own money” and “males always break their promise”. Some people, especially those youngsters, are easy to be trapped in the “information cocoon”. Inevitably, they have a deep-rooted negative perception of males, which also leads to the situation of anti-male bias in words.

5. Suggestions on the Reduction of Anti-male Bias in Words

First of all, what we should do is to respect males’ choices and freedom to be as feminine or masculine. The world should be diverse. A person’s character ought not always to be linked with just

the gender. People should question whether it is necessary to warn males to behave like “males” and females like “females”. A male’s masculine on the surface has been focused on too much, while his virtue has been as often as not neglected, such as kindness, honesty as well as responsibility. Especially in education, students should be taught never to use insulting words like “sissy”. Boys should be allowed to release their true nature and express their feelings.

What’s more, the media should set a positive value. A rational and mature society should be inclusive all the time. The media had better look at the “crisis of masculinity” with a comprehensive, dialectical and developmental view. Furthermore, the media should also release news in a responsible manner. In terms of the news about gender relations, the wording should be as careful as possible so that they will not mislead the general public.

6. Conclusion

As can be seen from the above analysis, anti-male bias in words indeed exists. It mainly shows from three aspects, i.e., gender-exclusive language, gender-restrictive language and negative stereotyping. Anti-male bias in words either ignores the important role of males in society, or does harm to males’ healthy growth, mental development and image. The causes chiefly lies in the historical, cultural, media and social part. Therefore, to reduce anti-male bias in words, males’ choice should be respected. Moreover, education is indispensable, and school bullying at boys should be strictly controlled on campus. Finally, the mainstream media and We Media are supposed to play active roles in word choice. Only when people are aware of this problem and work together to solve it can anti-male bias in words be alleviated.

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