



Editorial: Non-Sexist and Non-Racist Writing

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Editorial

Non-sexist and non-racist writing

In 1989 *Area* published two pages entitled ‘Guidelines for the use of non-sexist language’. These guidelines were intended to help authors in their writing by focusing on terms which are sexist and value-laden in gender terms and discouraging their use. With the IBG committed to a policy of equal opportunities, the publication of such guidelines was seen as helpful in promoting more accurate and better writing and in encouraging the struggle against sexism and unequal opportunities. Subsequently, every issue of *Area* has, in its notes for contributors, referred back to the guidelines by volume number and page number and encouraged authors to read and use them.

The evidence from the manuscripts flowing in to the *Area* office is that in the vast majority of cases authors have taken care to consider sexist terms in their own writings and to eradicate them. Most authors cause little problem (in that sense!). However, there is still a residual number who seem oblivious to these issues, and whose manuscripts contain inappropriate use of such terms. When their terms are spotted by the editorial team they are rendered non-sexist. Hopefully we catch the majority, if not all, of such cases. Probably the most common phrasing to receive such treatment is ‘man and the environment’ or its variations, which stubbornly recurs. It was to reinforce the positive application of the guidelines that I had always intended to re-publish them in an issue during my tenure as editor of *Area*. This is something I believe subsequent editors should do as a recurrent event in order to re-focus on the issue, and to provide a recently accessible set of guidelines.

However, the IBG is also committed to equal opportunities in other spheres and one in particular could affect papers which are submitted to *Area*. This is the subject of racism and the possibility of racist terms being used in papers. Early in my period as editor it was suggested that non-racist guidelines would form a suitable counterpart to the non-sexist ones already established and published. The Equal Opportunities Working Party of the IBG was suggested as the forum in which to make progress and draft guidelines from the British Sociological Association were obtained to help kick-start this process. My wish was that the non-sexist guidelines could be re-published at the same time as the non-racist guidelines were published/launched. This would focus attention on the issue and provide a convenient ‘package’ for authors to consult.

Everyone seems to be agreed that non-racist guidelines are a good thing and that writing in IBG journals should be non-racist. However, what does this mean? IBG has a policy of being non-racist noted in its aims and on the inside back cover of *Area*, but again what does it mean in practice? The Equal Opportunities Working Party is currently looking at these issues. In journal terms I cannot point to guidelines, good practice or anything that codifies the issues or helps authors. Maybe we all know racist writing when we see it, and as the evidence suggests there is none in papers published in *Area*, perhaps this is not an issue to worry about. However I don’t believe I am alone in feeling uncomfortable in IBG clothing itself in non-racist garb but then being unable to provide details to back up the fine sentiments.

This is complicated further however when we consider non-racist writing in more detail. It is fundamental to ask if we actually do know what non-racist writing is. The British Sociological Association draft guidelines, which are reproduced on pages 292–4

of this issue of *Area*, contains some ‘surprises’ in the list of unacceptable terms, and certainly could provide discussion. For example it is interesting to conceive of population geographers writing without some of these terms. Whilst context is crucially important, it is still a ‘cop-out’ to use context as a shield to avoid developing guidelines and perhaps thereby use terms that others find offensive. The difficulty is that we do not seem to be able to agree what these guidelines should contain.

The Equal Opportunities Working Party has not yet agreed on guidelines (see draft proposals in forthcoming Newsletter). I therefore would be interested in any input from members to the debate and process. The non-sexist guidelines are republished on pages 290–2 of this issue. Do they need strengthening or amending? The non-racist guidelines from the British Sociological Association are published on pages 292–4. Are these suitable for geography? How could/should they be modified or do we simply have to live with bland statements like ‘avoid racist writing or bias’ as our fig-leaf?

This issue is I believe an important one. It is important in its own right and it is important in other contexts, one of which can be noted here.

This is the public issue of Political Correctness (PC) which has become a large topic in the USA in particular. PC refers to attempts to make ideas and words off-limits for use and debate. Such issues generally include race and gender but can be extended into other areas such as the Third World and personal habits such as smoking. This has been portrayed by some writers as ‘campus newspeak’ with thought control and militant students/staff making sure the ‘right’ line is trodden. It is instructive and worrying that one such writer (Barbara Amiel, *Campus Newspeak*, *The Sunday Times*, 16 June 1991, pages 1, 6) also sees the British Sociological Association guidelines noted above as being evidence of PC spreading into the UK. Her argument is that such guidelines and approaches to such topics go too far. Is this really the case? Can we really believe an argument that racist and sexist writing should be allowed?

What this debate does illustrate however is the difficulty in drawing lines in this issue. Where should the IBG or geography’s line(s) be?

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Guidelines for the use of non-sexist language

Psychologists have made a substantial contribution to documenting sexism in the structure and use of the English language. Research has refuted the belief that gender-specific terms are invariably interpreted by the reader as generic and in particular, that the male form includes the female. These and other conventions have been shown to reflect and reinforce sex-role stereotypes, and the weight of the evidence is sufficient to justify the effort entailed in writing non-sexist prose.

Help the reader focus on the content of your paper by avoiding language that may cause irritation, flights of thought, or even momentary interruptions. Such sources of distraction include linguistic devices and constructions that might imply sexual, ethnic or other kinds of bias.

Language that reinforces sexism can spring from subtle errors in research design, inaccurate interpretation or imprecise word choices. An investigator may unintentionally introduce bias into the research design: for example, by using stimulus materials and measures that suggest to one sex or the other what responses are ‘appropriate’; or, in interpretation, an investigator may

make unwarranted generalisations about both men and women from data about one sex. Imprecise word choices, which occur frequently in journal writing may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning, even if they are not intended to be.

Sexism in journal writing may be classified into two categories: problems of designation and problems of evaluation. When you refer to a person or persons, choose words that are accurate, clear and free from bias. Long-established cultural practice can exert a powerful, insidious influence over even the most conscientious author. For example, the use of 'man' as a generic noun can be ambiguous and may convey an implicit message that women are of secondary importance. You can choose nouns, pronouns and adjectives to eliminate, or at least to minimise, the possibility of ambiguity in sex identity or sex role. In the examples, problems of designation are divided into two sub-categories: 'ambiguity of referent', when it is unclear whether the author means one sex or both sexes and 'stereotyping' when the writing conveys unsupported or biased connotations about sex roles and identity.

Scientific writing, as an extension of science, should be free of implied or irrelevant evaluation of the sexes. Difficulties may derive from the habitual use of clichés or familiar expressions, such as 'man and wife'. The use of 'man' and 'wife' together implies differences in the freedom and activities of each and may inappropriately prompt the reader to evaluate the roles. Thus, 'husband and wife' and 'man and woman' are parallel but 'man and wife' are not. In the examples below problems of evaluation, like problems of designation, are divided into 'ambiguity of referent' and 'stereotyping'.

The task of changing language may seem awkward at first. Nevertheless, careful attention to meaning and practice in rephrasing will overcome any initial difficulty. The result of such effort, and the purpose of the guidelines, is accurate, unbiased communication.

Examples of common usage

Problems of designation: ambiguity of referent

1 *The client is usually the best judge of the value of his counselling*

The **client** is usually the best judge of the value of counselling (Comment: **his** deleted).

The client is usually the best judge of the value of **his** or **her** counselling (Comment: **or her** added—use sparingly to avoid monotonous repetition).

Clients are usually the best judges of the value of the counselling (Comment: changed to plural).

The best judge of the value of counselling is usually **the client** (Comment: rephrased).

2 *Man's search for knowledge has led him into ways of learning that bear examination*

The search for knowledge has led us into ways of learning that bear examination (Comment: rephrased in first person).

People have continually sought knowledge. The search has led them into ways of learning that bear examination. (Comment: changed to plural and rewritten in two sentences).

3 *man, mankind*

people, humanity, human beings, humankind, human species.

man's achievements

human achievements, achievements of the human species

the average man

the average person, people in general

man a project

staff a project, hire personnel, employ staff

man-machine interface

user-system interface, person-system interface, human-machine interface

manpower

work force, personnel, workers, human resources

(Comment: various terms substituted for each example).

4 *males, females*

men, women, boys, girls, adults, children, adolescents (Comment: specific nouns reduce the possibility of stereotype bias and often clarify discussion). Use **male** and **female** as adjectives where appropriate and relevant (*female* experimenter, *male* subject). Avoid unparallel usage as 10 *men* and 16 *females*).

5 *mothering*

parenting, nurturing (or specify exact behaviour) (Comment: noun substituted).

6 *chairman, chairperson, chairwoman*

Use chair.

Problems of evaluation: ambiguity of referent

7 *The authors acknowledge the assistance of Mrs John Smith*

The authors acknowledge the assistance of **Jane Smith** (Comment: use given names).

8 *men and women, sons and daughters, boys and girls, husbands and wives*

women and men, daughters and sons, girls and boys, wives and husbands (Comment: vary the order if content does not require traditional order).

9 *ambitious men and aggressive women*

ambitious **women and men**, ambitious people

aggressive **men and women**, aggressive people

cautious men and timid women

cautious **women and men**, cautious **people**

timid **men and women**, timid **people**

(Comment: some adjectives, depending on whether the person described is a man or woman connote bias. The examples illustrate some common usages that may not always convey exact meaning especially when paired).

10 *woman driver*

driver

(Comment: if specifying sex is necessary, avoid biased cliches. Use female driver or write 'The driver was a woman').

11 *women's lib, women's libber*

women's movement, feminist, support of women's movement

(Comment: noun substituted).

Like language that may be interpreted as sexist, language that may be construed as ethnically biased can be classified into problems of designation and problems of evaluation. Styles and preferences for nouns referring to ethnic groups change over time. In some cases, even members of a group disagree about the preferred name at a specific time. You should try to ascertain the most acceptable current terms and use them. Consideration for your audience should prevail.

The majority of instances of implied irrelevant evaluation seem to occur when the writer uses one group (usually the writer's own group) as the standard against which others are assessed. Unfortunately, the basis for negative comparisons is usually established during the planning of the research, for example, by the choice of empirical measures.

At the writing stage, avoid language that suggests evaluation. An example of implied evaluation is found in the term 'culturally deprived' when it is used to describe a single group rather than to compare two or more groups. Using the term to describe one group of subjects without the supporting data required in scientific writing implies that one culture is a universally accepted standard against which others are judged. As a rest of implied evaluation, substitute another group (e.g. your own) for the group being discussed. If you are offended by the revised statement, there is probably bias in the original statement.

BSA anti-racist language guidelines

The guidelines are divided into three sections: acceptable terms; acceptable/unacceptable (depending on context); unacceptable terms.

Acceptable terms

Black This is a term often used as a new cultural construct with the implication of solidarity among minorities against racism. To accept this suggests that we should seek to avoid the many negative connotations relating to the word 'black' in the English language. However, some Asians in Britain object to the term black being applied to them. The single term confuses a range

of ethnicities. So some way of referring to these Asians seems desirable as an additional term for use as occasion indicates. Persons of South Asian origin may be most appropriate for Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. However, reference to origins is not entirely satisfactory since many second generation members of the minorities were born in Britain and prefer some term which indicates their Britishness. One answer to this might be—British Asians. One might also use the nationality for more specific reference—British Pakistanis, or Chinese British. It may not matter whether we put the term ‘British’ before or after the accompanying nationality origin. A further advantage of the two term reference is that the two ethnicities are mentioned and this avoids any suggestion that a member of a minority has chosen or has to choose between them for his/her identity.

Afro-Caribbean is another term popular among many West Indian British. Its overtones seem to be those of an anti-racist language.

Minorities. This is a useful term. It is generally preferable to ‘ethnic minorities’ as this term infers that the majority is not ethnic too. A snag which needs to be born in mind if one is addressing an American audience is that American sociologists seem often to use the term not in a numerical sense but in a power sense. This makes it possible to refer to a numerical majority as a minority if they have minimal power. If one has a British and American audience, one ought therefore to clarify how one is using the term.

Preferred terms

Black people/person. Also black British.

British Asians. Also British Pakistanis or Indian British.

Afro-Caribbean.

Minorities.

Acceptable/unacceptable

There seems to be a case for a category which is neither wholly acceptable, nor wholly unacceptable. Rather, there are some concepts either acceptable or unacceptable depending on the context or usage. Three concepts are considered in these terms and there may well be others.

Non-White. This may be acceptable where one wishes to refer to say, whites and non-whites. However, continual reference to non-whites might be seen as demeaning. Frequent allusion would therefore do better to use terms like black people, British Asians, etc.

Overseas. Some people argue that it is a neutral term. Other people feel that there is a suggestion of Britain’s former overseas possessions. However, there may be no reason for not using the term for persons from the Third World. But, it is doubtfully relevant for black British since many such will have been born in Britain and hence not be from overseas.

Naming a race or ethnic group. In general there is no case in attempting to avoid spelling out relevant races or ethnic groups. Even so, this is true only if relevant to the context. Unless this is so, the naming device may well be another, if subtle, form of racism. It could be a means of identifying a racial/ethnic group so that they are clarified for pejorative comment.

Unacceptable terms

There are many terms of racial abuse and there is little point in trying to cover them all. However, it may be useful to mention some of the very common ones since some sociologists will often find themselves in positions where the terms are in common use. Moreover, in some situations, people have to be taught not to use such terms, eg, some schools, neighbourhood groups, youth clubs, etc.

Racist terms

Cannibal(s)

Cannibalism

Civilised/civilisation

Non-racist comment

A tradition of cannibalism seems to exist in many parts of the world but it is best avoided in jokes where it tends to be derogatory to black people.

Colonialist perception. Often associated with Social Darwinist thought. Full of unperceived value judgements and ignorance of Third World history. Use industrial society. However, in some circumstances (eg, work of Nateil Elisa), civilisation has a different meaning and does not have racist overtones.

Coloured	Offensive to many black people. Use terms like black persons, etc.
Host society	Unwise term to use now since many former immigrants can rightfully claim to be part of the host society. One could preferably talk of the society receiving immigrants.
Immigrants	Many of the post-World War 2 immigrants are now part of British society. Use nationality if known else use terms such as black people, etc.
Indigenous	At what point does one become native-born? Many black people now born in Britain.
Native	Native born is acceptable. Otherwise the term has strong colonialist connotations, eg, whites and natives.
Negro/Negress	Often considered acceptable in Britain but not in America. Use depends on the audience.
Primitive	Derogatory overtones. Prefer non-industrial.