Perceptions of People Who Use Non-Heterosexist Language by People of Different Sexual Orientations

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Acknowledgements................................................................. iii

II. Abstract................................................................................. v

III. Introduction................................................................. 1
   The current Study.......................................................... 4

IV. Method............................................................. 6
   Participants................................................................. 6
   Procedures............................................................... 7
   Measures................................................................. 8

V. Results................................................................. 9
   Descriptive Data.......................................................... 9
   Multivariate Analysis..................................................... 10

VI. Discussion.............................................................. 13
   Limitations.............................................................. 17
   Future Directions......................................................... 19

VII. References............................................................... 22

VIII. Tables................................................................. 25

IX. Appendices............................................................. 36
ABSTRACT

One hundred fifty participants who self-identified as heterosexual and 152 participants who self-identified as queer were asked to read a vignette containing a character who used either heterosexist or non-heterosexist language. With regards to the latter vignette, the researcher hypothesized that queer participants would assume that the character using non-heterosexist language 1) was more supportive of queer rights; 2) had increased exposure to queer people; 3) was more likely to be queer; 4) was more open to new ideas in general; and 5) was more likely to be someone with whom they could be friends. Heterosexual participants were not expected to make the same assumptions about the character in the vignette. Results showed that both heterosexual and queer participants made similar assumptions about the character in the vignette who used non-heterosexist language; however, in most cases queer participants made significantly stronger assumptions than heterosexual participants.
INTRODUCTION

The study of the interaction between minority populations and communication practices is a small but growing field. Although there is some research and debate on communication within the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual\(^1\) (i.e., queer) community, most studies focus on phonological qualities of queer voices or the use of highly specific vocabulary within specific isolated groups (Kulick, 2000). Very little research has been conducted on the intersection between oppression of people in the queer community at large and the role of language. This study was designed to directly address this deficit in the literature.

Oppression is a phenomenon that most people in American culture experience and/or perpetuate on a daily basis. However, an individual’s response and sensitivity to such oppression varies depending on the type of oppression in question. Intentional and personally mediated forms of oppression such as hate speech and active racial profiling, for example, are very conspicuous and, as such, tend to be shunned by most people. Conversely, other forms of oppression such as institutional oppression are widespread and few people know when they are participating in it (Johnson, 2001). In fact, the majority of people do not recognize when they are oppressing others because they do not enact overt forms of oppression (Johnson, 2001). Although the more conspicuous forms

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\(^1\) Note that the term “queer” is not used as a derogatory term. Many people who identify themselves as non-heterosexual are attempting to reclaim the term. In this paper “queer” is used positively as an umbrella term for those who view their sexuality as something other than completely heterosexual. Melinda Yuen-Ching Chen, Ph.D. explains that, “reclaiming refers to an array of theoretical and conventional interpretations of both linguistic and non-linguistic collective acts in which a derogatory sign or signer is consciously employed by the ‘original’ target of the derogation, often in a positive or Oppositional sense” (Yuen-Ching Chen, 1998, p. 130). A good example is the inverted pink triangle. This now popular symbol of queer culture has its origins in the Holocaust. Nazis required male homosexuals to wear such a badge on their uniforms so that they could easily be identified in concentration camps. Since the Holocaust, the symbol has been reclaimed as a sign of queer pride and the queer rights movement.
of oppression have been studied for over 30 years (van Dijk, 1995), empirical research has only recently begun to examine the more insidious forms.

Johnson (2001) illustrates that institutional oppression is an aggregate effect given that it is the combination of many different aspects of a culture. Laws, social norms, and ways of behaving can work in concert to create or maintain systems that place groups of people at a disadvantage by denying or partially inhibiting equal access to privileges held by those at the top of the social hierarchy. When individuals blindly follow societal constructs, they are typically not consciously oppressing others and, as such, do not realize that oppression is taking place. With the exception of Lehmiller and Agnew’s (2006) work which found that queer people felt that their relationships were significantly more marginalized than heterosexuals’ relationships, relatively few research articles have been published regarding how people in the queer community experience oppression.

One form of institutional oppression is the use of exclusive language. The term “exclusive language” has been used by various authors to imply that certain language marginalizes particular groups, thereby preventing them from accessing the power structure that is enjoyed by others (e.g., Parks & Robertson, 2004; Rubin, Greene, & Schneider, 1994). An example of exclusive language is sexist language. Such language is denoted when people refer to occupations that can be held by either men or women by using gendered language (i.e., chairman, fireman, policeman vs. chair, firefighter, police officer). Sexist language reinforces social stereotypes or norms that intrinsically contain the idea that one gender is superior to the other. In contrast, inclusive language denotes a way of speaking that does not reinforce social stereotypes or norms that, for example,
intrinsically contain the idea that one gender is superior to the other (Parks & Robertson, 2000).

The use of sexist language has garnered some interest in the social sciences. Research has lead to many findings about sexist language, including that it implies male dominance and female subservience (Gastil, 1990; Kleinman, 2002) and that it affects how men and women view themselves (McKay, 1980). Research also suggests that men and women have different language patterns. Men, for example, are more likely to use sexist language than women (Murnen, 2000) and women are more likely than men to support the use of inclusive language (McConnell & Fazio, 1996). Interestingly, people who are more supportive of women’s rights are more supportive of inclusive language (Parks & Robertson, 2004) and people who are sexist notice sexist language less and use it more than those who are not sexist (Swim, Mallett, & Stangor, 2004). These findings suggest that language choice may reflect an underlying ideology or belief system.

The queer community is another minority group that is significantly affected by how people in Western society use language. One of the possible causes and symptoms of the perceived marginalization of queer populations is the omnipresence of heterosexism and heterosexist language. Neisen (1990) defines heterosexism as “the continued promotion by the major institutions of society of a heterosexual lifestyle while simultaneously subordinating any other lifestyle” (p. 25). Although some literature on heterosexism is available, most of it is from a sociological point of view. Such research suggests that, like other forms of institutional and personally mediated “isms” such as racism and sexism, heterosexism works as a form of oppression against a minority group (Johnson, 2001). There are many examples of heterosexism in current society, from
written laws that define what constitutes a legally recognized relationship, to attitudes that lead to lessened or denied services for those who are perceived by others to be queer (Neisen, 1990). Interestingly, heterosexism may be more socially acceptable than other “isms.” Derogatory queer humor often goes unchallenged, while jokes stemming from racist or misogynistic attitudes are generally frowned upon in “polite” culture (D’Augelli & Garnets, 1994).

Stemming from heterosexism is heterosexist language. Heterosexist language refers to speaking about another person’s significant other with gender pronouns used for heterosexual couplings before knowing that the person being spoken to is in a heterosexual relationship (Dorland & Fischer, 2001). There is little empirical research available on heterosexist language; the only published example is work from Dorland and Fischer (2001). Their research illustrated that queer people who read counseling vignettes that contained non-heterosexist (i.e., sexually inclusive) language rated the counselor’s skills more highly than did those who read passages that used heterosexist language. In further support of this work, a small pilot study based on Dorland and Fischer’s work found that when asked to directly compare heterosexist and non-heterosexist language, people in the queer community prefer the use of sexually inclusive language to heterosexist language in general; no such preference was found for people in the heterosexual community (Reisner, 2006). This work raises interesting questions about who prefers certain language choices and why such preferences exist.

The Current Study

Based on a range of therapeutic qualities, participants in Dorland and Fischer’s (2001) research rated a counselor who used non-heterosexist language more highly than
another counselor who used heterosexist language. Participants also indicated that they were more likely to both disclose their sexual identity to the counselor using non-heterosexist language and return for treatment. Such ratings may imply that participants assumed that counselors who use inclusive language are more likely to be supportive of them as a whole and more likely to support their sexual identity in particular. One of the possible reasons that the queer participants in both Dorland and Fischer’s (2001) and Reisner’s (2006) pilot study had preferences for non-heterosexist language may be that the language style used by individuals communicates extra information about the speaker beyond the overt meaning of words used. The present study examines this idea.

In addition, given that the major difference between sexist and heterosexist language is which minority group the language oppresses, it seems likely that the traits found for those who use gender inclusive language might be similar in those people who use sexually inclusive language. For example, if people who are more supportive of women’s rights are also more supportive of gender-inclusive language (Parks & Robertson, 2004), it stands to reason that people who are more supportive of queer rights will also be more supportive of inclusive language regarding significant others. Expanding on this idea, the purpose of this study was to examine if people exposed to non-heterosexist language would make attributions about the speaker in line with research that suggests a link between communication choice and ideological beliefs and personal traits. Moreover, drawing from Swim, et. al., (2004) work, this study examined whether or not people who are in a minority group, regardless of the type of minority group, will be more sensitive to language that oppresses them than those who are contributing to the oppression.
Based on previous work, it was hypothesized that queer people would be more sensitive to people who use heterosexist language and, by extension, they would be more likely to make assumptions about those who use non-heterosexist language than those who do not identify with the queer community. Specifically, it was hypothesized that, in comparison to heterosexual individuals, queer individuals would rate someone who uses sexually inclusive language as: 1) more supportive of queer rights; 2) having increased exposure to queer people; 3) more likely to be queer; 4) more open to new ideas in general; and 5) someone with whom they would be friends.

**METHODS**

*Participants*

Participants were solicited via recruitment statements posted to various social networks, internet message boards, Usenet groups, electronic forums, and list serves. Initially, such statements were posted only to communities aimed at serving queer people. This was done to ensure a large sample size of queer people. After 140 responses were collected, the recruitment statements were posted to general internet communities that did not have a queer focus.

Although over 400 people clicked on the URL that directed them to the website hosting the research, only 302 people completed the study. Of those who finished, 150 identified themselves as queer and 152 identified themselves as heterosexual. A total of 92 (31%) participants identified themselves as male, 84% of whom also identified themselves as queer and 210 (69%) participants identified themselves as female, 29% of whom also identified themselves as queer. Overall, participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 71 years ($M = 27$, $SD = 10.4$), the mean age of heterosexual males was 25.89 years ($SD$...
7.38), the mean age of queer males was 33.45 years ($SD = 12.68$), the mean age of heterosexual females was 23.85 years ($SD = 7.25$), the mean age of queer females was 30.92 years ($SD = 10.76$). Additionally, 87.5% identified themselves as Caucasian, 5.3% identified themselves as Latino/a, 3.3% identified themselves as African American, and the remaining 3.9% identified themselves in the grouping of Asian, Indian, Pacific Islander and Other. Responses were collected from a total of nine U.S. states (61% from New York), Canada, the United Kingdom, and Spain.

**Procedures**

After the potential participant read the recruitment statement, he or she was directed to a website that hosted the survey. The first page of the survey explained participants’ rights as volunteers for this study and informed them that their participation in the survey constituted their informed consent. Next, participants were asked to indicate their gender before being randomly assigned to one of two conditions. One condition asked participants to read a vignette containing heterosexist language; the other condition asked participants to read a vignette containing non-heterosexist language. Although participants were randomly assigned to either the heterosexual or non-heterosexist condition, those assigned to the heterosexist language condition were presented with gendered pronouns commonly used in heterosexual relationships based on the participant’s gender (e.g., a female participant in the heterosexual group would have male pronouns used in reference to her partner). Ambiguous pronouns were used in all non-heterosexist vignette.

The vignettes created for this research were loosely based on a scenario used by Dorland and Fischer (2001) and involved an individual overhearing a co-working arguing
with his or her significant other on the phone (see Appendixes A and B). For the current study, participants was asked to imagine themselves as the office worker who has just had an argument over the phone with his or her significant other. The dialogue of this office worker was identical in both the heterosexist language vignette and the non-heterosexist vignette. In both vignettes, the gender of the significant other was not revealed. The interlocutor’s dialogue was also identical in both vignettes, with the exception of the language manipulation.

Measures

To test the five hypotheses, five target questions were developed. In an effort to decrease possible demand characteristics, the target questions were interspersed with distracter questions that involved political beliefs and assumptions (e.g., questions about abortion and Medicaid). The first set of target questions involved the participants’ perceptions of the co-worker’s attitudes toward the queer community. These questions were: 1) How likely do you think it is that this co-worker supports gay rights?; 2) How likely do you think it is that this co-worker has had much exposure to gay people?; and 3) How likely do you think it is that this co-worker is gay? The second group of target questions involved the participants’ general attitudes toward people who use different communication styles. These questions were: 1) How likely do you think it is that you would make friends with this co-worker?; 2) How likely do you think it is that this co-worker is open to new ideas?; and 3) Did this co-worker’s language repel or attract you?

After reading their assigned vignette, participants were asked to rate their feelings and attitudes regarding both the target and distracter questions about the co-worker on 7-point Likert-type scales. The scales were anchored at point 1 with “very unlikely” and at
point 7 with “very likely.” Following, participants were asked to disclose demographic information, including sexual orientation. Participants were asked to indicate their sexual identity by using a modified version of the Kinsey scale (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) ranging from 1 (heterosexual) to 7 (homosexual). Number 4 was labeled “bisexual” and 8 was labeled “other.” The wide range of values is inclusive of those who identify themselves at some point along a spectrum of sexual orientation rather than as distinctly heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual.

For the purpose of this data analysis, participants who choose 1 or 2 on the scale of sexual orientation were considered heterosexual and those who choose values between 3 and 8, inclusive, were considered queer. Upon completion of the demographic information, participants were debriefed as to the nature of the experiment.

RESULTS

Descriptive Data

Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated between demographic variables (i.e., sexual orientation, exposure to the queer community, level of support for queer rights, age, and liberalness) and the six individual questions that comprised the dependent variables (i.e., attractiveness of language, likelihood of becoming friends, openness to new ideas, level of support for queer rights, exposure to queer community, likelihood of queer identification). Findings are reported in Table 1.

Sexual orientation was positively correlated with amount of exposure to the queer community ($r = .32, p < .01$), level of support for queer rights ($r = .22, p < .01$), age ($r = .41, p < .01$), and liberalness ($r = .22, p < .01$). Queer participants reported a higher level of exposure to the queer community, greater support for queer rights, and a more liberal
political position than those who identified themselves as heterosexual. Queer people also tended to be older. The amount of exposure to the queer community was also positively correlated with level of support for queer rights \((r = .34, p < .01)\) and liberalness \((r = .29, p < .001)\). Those who had greater exposure to the queer community supported the queer community more, and were more liberal than those who had less exposure. Lastly, the level of support for queer rights was positively correlated with liberalness \((r = .43, p < .01)\). This indicates that those who greatly supported queer rights were likely to have more liberal attitudes.

In terms of the relationship between demographic characteristics and the dependent variables, orientation of participants was positively correlated with how much exposure participants thought the co-worker in their assigned vignette had to the queer community \((r = .121, p < .05)\). The level of influence of this correlation was low and was not run as a covariate. Age of participants was also positively correlated with participants’ perceptions of how likely it was that the given co-worker was queer \((r = .15, p < .01)\). Due to the significance, age was included in the multivariate analysis as a covariate. All other correlations were insignificant. Independent sample t-tests were run to check for response differences directly related to the gender of participants. Compared with the study’s female participants, male participants indicated that the language used in the vignettes was more attractive \((t(182) = 2.58, p < .05)\); they also indicated that they could more likely become friends with the vignettes’ co-worker \((t(182) = 2.59, p < .05)\).

Multivariate Analyses

The language used in the non-heterosexist vignette was expected to lead participants to make more positive assumptions about the co-worker and to perceive the
co-worker as more queer friendly than the co-worker in the heterosexist language vignette. It was also expected that there would be an interaction between type of language and participants’ sexuality. People who identified themselves as queer were expected to rate the non-heterosexist co-worker more positively and the heterosexist co-worker more negatively than the participants who identified themselves as heterosexual. Results for each dependent variable are reported in Table 2.

Two separate 2 (heterosexual vs. queer orientation) x 2 (inclusive vs. exclusive language scenario) multivariate analysis of covariance tests were performed (MANCOVA). In both MANCOVAs age was used as the covariate. The first MANCOVA (see Table 3) assessed group differences in assumptions about the co-worker’s attitudes about the queer community: 1) if the co-worker was a supporter of queer rights; 2) if the co-worker had a large amount of exposure to the queer community; and 3) if the co-worker was queer. Using Wilks’ criterion, it was found that there was a significant main effect of the language condition on the combined dependent variables, $F(3, 278) = 27.79, p < .001$. Univariate analyses revealed that all three dependent variables were significant ($p < .001$); participants in the non-heterosexist condition perceived the co-worker to be more supportive of queer rights, to have had more exposure to the queer community, and to more likely be queer than participants randomly assigned to the heterosexist condition.

No main effect was found for sexual orientation; however, there was a significant interaction between sexual orientation and assigned condition, $F(3, 278) = 4.94, p < .002$. As shown in Table 3, univariate analyses revealed a significant interaction between sexual orientation and perceptions of support for the queer community ($p < .008$). Queer
participants, compared to heterosexual participants, perceived the use of non-heterosexist language as reflective of a co-worker who was more supportive of the queer community. At the same time, queer participants, as compared to heterosexual participants, perceived the use of heterosexist language as reflective of a co-worker who was less supportive of the queer community. The question concerning level of exposure to the queer community \((p < .001)\) revealed similar findings. Queer participants, as compared to heterosexual participants, perceived the use of non-heterosexist language as reflective of a co-worker with more exposure to the queer community. At the same time, queer participants, as compared to heterosexual participants, perceived the use of heterosexist language as reflective of a co-worker with less exposure to the queer community. The final question regarding if participants thought that the co-worker was queer was not significant. While there appeared to be a considerable difference between heterosexual \((M = 2.72, SD = 1.28)\) and queer responses \((M = 2.71, SD = 1.54)\) in the non-heterosexist condition, there was very little difference between heterosexual \((M = 3.44, SD = 1.31)\) and queer responses \((M = 3.81; SD = 1.28)\) in the heterosexist condition.

The second MANCOVA examined assumptions made about the co-worker’s general attributes (Table 4). Specifically, it examined whether or not the co-worker’s language 1) attracted or repelled the participant; 2) if participants thought that they could be friends with the co-worker; and 3) if participants thought that the co-worker was open to new ideas. According to Wilks’ criterion there was a significant main effect for the language condition \((p < .001)\). Univariate analyses revealed that all three dependent variables were significant. Compared to the co-worker in the heterosexist language condition, non-heterosexist language lead both queer and heterosexual participants to
consider that the co-worker’s words were more attractive, that they would be more likely to make friends with the co-worker, and that the co-worker would be more open to new ideas. There was no significant effect found for sexual orientation or significant interaction between language condition and sexual orientation.

DISCUSSION

According to the research conducted on sexist language, individual attributes are associated with the use of gender-neutral language. Use of gender-inclusive language is more frequently used by women (Murnen, 2000), people who are more supportive of women’s rights (Parks & Robertson, 2004), and by people who are less sexist overall (Swim, et. al., 2004). Building on this work, the purpose of this study was to investigate if individuals would ascribe certain attributes to people who use different types of language (heterosexist vs. non-heterosexist). In addition, given Dorland and Fischer’s (2001) study in which queer participants rated fictitious counselors in vignettes that used non-heterosexist language as better counselors than those using heterosexist language and as counselors to whom they were more likely to reveal their sexuality, the ways in which individuals evaluate and perceive language choice was expected to be related to assumptions made about how supportive the speaker was of the queer community. Accordingly, the hypotheses of this study were that, in comparison to heterosexual individuals, queer people were expected to make assumptions about a person who uses sexually inclusive language that are in line with the findings about people who use inclusive language in general. Specifically, queer people were expected to rate someone who uses non-heterosexual language as 1) more supportive of queer rights; 2) more likely
to identify themselves as queer; 3) more exposed to the queer community, 4) more open to new ideas; and 5) more likely to be someone with whom they could be friends.

As evidenced in the current study, it appears that the difference in language is salient enough to be noticed by both queer and heterosexual people alike, and that the kind of language used contains implications about the co-worker’s relationship with the queer community. The results support the hypothesis that people make attributions about others’ level of support for the queer community, depending on if the person uses heterosexist or non-heterosexist language. In the vignettes, the co-worker using non-heterosexist language was thought to be more supportive of the queer rights movement, have more exposure to the queer community, and was perceived as more likely to be queer. These assumptions parallel the attributes identified in people who use non-sexist language (e.g., Murnen, 2000; Parks & Robertson, 2004; Swim, et. al., 2004). Moreover, the strength of the assumptions increases if the listener is a member of the queer community.

According to this research, queer people are particularly sensitive to the use of sexually inclusive language. This sensitivity may be due to the idea that queer people have more invested in how people relate to the queer community and, by extension, how people relate to queer individuals, including themselves. Accordingly, the risks due to the minority status of people in the queer population, including the possibility of marginalization, unfair business practices, and violence, may prompt queer individuals to be hypervigilant about who is aware of their sexual orientation (Meyer, 2003). This may be related to an individual’s general desire to identify safe spaces and safe people. Eadie (2005) defines safe space as “[A place] where everyone there is gay or accepting of
same-sex attraction.” (p. 200) In essence, language may act as a subtle marker for identifying safe people, members of the queer community, and their allies.

There are other examples of subtle communication that have been found to be used by the queer community. Implicit or subtle advertisements that use queer icons, such as inverted pink triangles or modifications of the gay pride flag, seem to go unnoticed by heterosexual people while they are picked up by people in the queer community (Oakenfull & Greenlee, 2005). Oakenfull and Greenlee (2005) performed a study where heterosexual people and queer people were asked to look at a collection of 20 advertisements and rate how much the advertisements appealed to them and discern to whom the advertisements were targeted. Results from the study showed that members of the queer population correctly identified all the ads directed towards queer people as queer ads and responded more positively to implicit queer ads that contained items such as small pink triangles or rainbow flags, in comparison to heterosexual ads or explicitly homosexual ads containing images of same-sex couples kissing. Although heterosexual people were generally able to identify overt queer advertisements as targeting the queer community, the implicit advertisements were interpreted as targeting the heterosexual community. Additionally, the implicit queer ads were rated as favorably as heterosexual ads, while explicit queer ads were ranked significantly lower.

Bhat, Leigh, and Wardlow (1999) suggest that heterosexual people do not notice subtle icons, while queer people identify and respond to them clearly. They propose that the ads are read differently as a by-product of cultural asymmetry, leading to different interpretations of the same image. Their work suggests that there are inherent differences between different cultures and subcultures that influence the ways in which members of
particular groups view the world. These differences in worldview may be reflected in what kind of information is gleaned from different visual stimuli and, as suggested by the current study, audio stimuli as well.

One very intriguing finding in the current study involves the question that asked the likelihood of the co-worker being queer. For this particular question, there was a significant effect for language (i.e., the co-worker who used non-heterosexist language was rated much more likely to possibly be queer compared to the co-worker in the heterosexist condition). Interestingly, there was no interaction between language condition and sexual orientation. Language was salient regardless of sexual orientation. Furthermore, the mean differences in this condition indicated that queer participants were more likely to consider that the co-worker could be queer than heterosexual participants. In the heterosexist condition, however, both queer and heterosexual participants thought it was equally likely that the co-worker was queer.

A possible explanation for the equal ratings by queer and heterosexual participants in the heterosexist condition may be because it is common for queer people to actively hide their sexual orientation at different points in time. As such, it may behoove queer people not to assume others are definitely heterosexual because they are not overtly identifying themselves as queer. However, it does appear that using non-heterosexist language may make people think that a person is more likely to be queer. These findings support the link between sexist research and heterosexist research. In previous research, women, the oppressed group, were more likely to use inclusive language (Murnen, 2000). This study suggests that, in the case of heterosexism, the use of inclusive language leads people to assume that the person using such language is more
likely to be a member of an oppressed group. Moreover, if the person listening is queer, he or she may feel that it is even more likely that the person using inclusive language is also a member or ally of the queer community. This furthers the idea that the language may be used as a marker for sexual identity and that people of different sexual orientations may notice this marker to different extents.

The second group of data that concerns more general assumptions made about the co-workers did not fully support the hypothesis. Although participants indicated that the non-heterosexist language attracted them more than the heterosexist language, the degree to which participants were more likely to become friends with the co-workers and perceived the co-workers as more open to new ideas was not influenced by the sexual orientation of participants. This outcome suggests that the difference in pronoun usage is a salient enough factor that people responded to the difference in similar ways, regardless of sexual orientation. Additionally, it also suggests that queer people and heterosexual people both have a preference for those who use non-heterosexist language. This finding may be tied to the research performed by Dorland and Fischer (2001) with regard to how the counseling vignettes were perceived. In their research, the fictitious counselors that used non-heterosexist language were perceived as being better counselors, with the participants rating them as more open, trustworthy and supportive. Perhaps people who use gender-neutral pronouns are perceived by others, both inside and outside of the queer community, to make fewer assumptions, a characteristic that is favored by all individuals.

Limitations

Despite the relatively large sample and the researcher’s active attempts to conduct a study with high levels of participant diversity in age, race/ethnicity, and location, the
vast majority of those who participated in the present study were Caucasian. Additionally, most heterosexual people in the sample responded as part of a large influx after a recruitment statement was mass e-mailed to the SUNY New Paltz community. SUNY New Paltz and the surrounding town are considered by many to be a liberal location. Heterosexual people who were sampled from SUNY New Paltz may possibly be more sensitive to the queer community than other populations. Additionally, 76% of all participants reported that they had a medium amount of exposure to the queer community or higher. This percentage of people, particularly heterosexual people, may be very high compared to the general population. As such, the responses from heterosexual people sampled in this research may reflect a greater sensitivity to the language conditions when compared with heterosexual people in the general population.

In addition, queer populations were sampled mostly via Yahoo general interest groups aimed at queer people, queer college group list serves, and postings on social networks aimed at queer people. Most of these groupings are moderated and the moderator needed to approve the recruitment statement before it would be visible to the group members. Not all moderators approved the posting; therefore, it is possible that there may be important differences in underlying traits of group members and/or moderators that lead to the recruitment statement being approved or not. There are similar groups on the internet for the general population. However, these groups are far and few between and most are not as “safe” as more focused groups since there are many people who enjoy harassing or disrupting the work of others. Some messages were posted to such groups, and to general interest social networks, but most responses were collected immediately after the e-mail sent to people on the New Paltz list serve. As a result, there
may be inherent differences that reach beyond sexual orientation between the composition of the queer groups and those who responded from New Paltz.

Furthermore, while a conscious effort was made to target at least some groups that served people of color, people with disabilities, and other minority groups within the queer community, the recruitment statements only reached people who had computers and who chose to be members of online social groups. While it is extremely likely that thousands of people saw the recruitment statement, it still was only visible to a fairly small and possibly select group of people. It may be that people who are members of online social groups have particular similar qualities that could have caused them to answer the questions in similar ways. There were also a large number of people who clicked on the URL to the survey but did not go beyond the informed consent or did not complete the roster of questions asked. These people who dropped out of the study may have similar qualities and, if they had participated, may have affected the results of the research.

Lastly, all data collected was in a self-report format and was based on hypothetical situations. If a participant accurately perceived the intent of the study, he or she may have consciously, or non-consciously, responded with demand characteristics or out of social desirability. Also, since the vignettes were constructed as brief dialogues, they clearly differed from en vivo encounters and, as such, may not generalize to real-life settings. Both of these factors hamper the external validity of this study.

**Future directions**

Much work has yet to be done on the intersection of inclusive language and sexual orientation. A qualitative study based on this research would be a good first step.
An open-ended research format exploring more fully what implications are drawn based on the use of non-heterosexist language by queer and heterosexual people could potentially uncover much more extensive constructs. Moreover, there is very little research focusing on how queer people experience institutional oppression or how queer people interact as a community whose members switch between being known and clandestine in different situations.

Parts of these experiences can be tapped via language. For example, there is no research concerning what may lead an individual to use non-heterosexist language in particular situations. Similarly, there is no research as to whether non-heterosexist language is used all the time or if its use is conscious or non-conscious. In either case, an important question involves when it is used or not used. Is it used in ambiguous situations to test the waters? Is it used as a general signal for people who may be listening for it? Is it used in a targeted way? Is use refrained in potentially threatening situations?

Some additional questions would be interesting to investigate exclusively within the heterosexual community. The use of non-heterosexist language directly implies that the speaker is attempting not to make an assumption about a person’s sexual orientation. It is possibly offensive to some people who identify themselves as heterosexual to not automatically be assumed to be heterosexual. It is highly likely that different factors may influence the results of these questions and that different potential groupings may have different responses. Other groups that would be interesting to consider are the transgender/transsexual/intersexed/genderqueer (trans) communities. Trans people are a growing minority within a minority. People who identify themselves as members of the trans community may even be excluded by inclusive language. The challenges trans
people face using standard dichotomous language used to describe the sex and gender of themselves and their partners could lead to many insights into the evolution and creation of language.

Lastly, an important area for future inquiry involves direct studies that explore the degree to which sexually inclusive language or other forms of communication that contain queer implications are used for identification of safe people and safe spaces. Broader studies about language and minority population identification would also be very intriguing. One question involves if members of other minority groups use marked language to identify people who are members of their community. If so, what kind of language works as a marker: local slang, accents, overarching inclusive terms, modifications of standard English grammar, or a combination of two or more of these?

This research should clearly be viewed as a beginning point. Many more areas of research related to this work need to be developed and advanced, particularly research that examines traditionally underrepresented groups of people such as women and racial/ethnic and sexual minorities. It is likely that research that is inclusive of different groups of people would lead to findings that suggest commonalities, as well as differences, between groups. This may potentially help illuminate a new understanding of people of both minority and majority status.
REFERENCES


### Table 1

**Intercorrelations Between Demographic Variables and Attributions Made of the Speaker**

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*Note:* *p < .05, **p < .01.*
### Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables by Language Condition*

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Table 3

**Between-Subject Effects for Co-Workers' Attitudes About the Queer Community**

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*Note. *p < .05, **p < .01.*
Table 4

*Between-Subject Effects for Co-Workers’ General Attributions*

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*Note.* *p < .05, **p < .01.*
APPENDICES
Appendix A

Male Heterosexist Condition

Scenario:

Imagine that you have been working at a new job for the last 3 months. You have just gotten off the phone after having a heated argument over money and bills with the person on the other end of the line. A nearby coworker that you have a friendly relationship with, but do not know all that well, comes over and the following conversation takes place.

Coworker: Sorry, I couldn’t help overhearing your phone call. It sounds like you’re having a rough time with your wife.

You: Yeah, sorry about the noise. These arguments are just the tail end of it. We’ve been fighting about what belongs to whom, and who’s responsible for what bill. It’s a nightmare.

Coworker: Wow. Are you two getting a divorce now?

You: No. We were living together for 4 years. We had some mutual friends in school. About 5 years ago we hit it off at a party, started dating, and started living together a year later. We separated and moved in to our own places 2 months ago.

Coworker: That’s a long time to be together. What happened between you and her?
You: I don’t even know! We moved here for better job opportunities. We got settled into our apartment and then, after about a month, right out of the blue, Bam! I was told it was over.

Coworker: Jeeze… Your ex-girlfriend gave you no warning at all?

You: Nope. Overall, I thought we had a really good relationship, no real problems. You know, we had the regular ups and downs that couples always have, but basically I thought we were doing well. This really caught me off guard.

Coworker: Uh-oh… The boss is starting to give me dirty looks. I should get back to my desk. But try and look on the bright side. There are plenty of other women out there.

You: That’s true. I guess I should try and get back to work, too. Thanks for talking to me.

Appendix B

Non-Heterosexist Condition

Scenario:

Imagine that you have been working at a new job for the last 3 months. You have just gotten off the phone after having a heated argument over money and bills with the person on the other end of the line. A nearby coworker that you have a friendly relationship with, but do not know all that well, comes over and the following conversation takes place.

Coworker: Sorry, I couldn’t help overhearing your phone call. It sounds like you’re having a rough time with your significant other.

You: Yeah, sorry about the noise. These arguments are just the tail end of it. We’ve been fighting about what belongs to whom, and who’s responsible for what bill. It’s a nightmare.

Coworker: Wow. Are you two separating now?

You: No. We were living together for 4 years. We had some mutual friends in school. About 5 years ago we hit it off at a party, started dating, and started living together a year later. We separated and moved in to our own places 2 months ago.

Coworker: That’s a long time to be together. What happened between you and your partner?
You: I don’t even know! We moved here for better job opportunities. We got settled into our apartment and then after about a month, right out of the blue, Bam! I was told it was over.

Coworker: Jeeze… your ex gave you no warning at all?

You: Nope. Overall, I thought we had a really good relationship with no real problems. You know, we had the regular ups and downs that couples always have, but basically I thought we were doing well. This really caught me off guard.

Coworker: Uh-oh… The boss is starting to give me dirty looks. I should get back to my desk. But try and look on the bright side. There are plenty of other people out there.

You: That’s true. I guess I should try and get back to work, too. Thanks for talking to me.