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Words Matter:
Speaking and Writing About Gender and Science

Speaking and writing about gender and science presents many challenges, including choosing which words to use. Do we use the term gender or do we talk about sex? Is it better to talk about science or STEM? Should we use words like feminism or equity? We think about words in relation to their meaning and the information they transmit. However, words can also convey things like how much we know about our topic, the perspective we approach it from, where we stand on different issues, and how much we think our audience knows.

The words we use influence our audience's feelings about us and, more importantly, about how relevant our message is to them and their interests. Paying attention to word choice can really pay off! Since there's no single set of words that will work with all audiences, we need to choose the words we use consciously and carefully. Applying the following concepts may help.

Words tell people who we are, not just what we have to say

Different words can mean the same thing while connoting different things. Two cars can "collide" or they can "smash into each other." Both phrases accurately describe what happened, however they suggest different images to the audience. Similarly, using the term "stereotypes of women in science," paints a different picture than using "images of women in science." Use the implications and connotations of different words to support or emphasize your point.

Words and phrases can change in meaning or become more loaded based on current events. Over time, phrases can become associated with memorable events or positions. "Hasta la vista," with or without the "baby," is now irrevocably tied to Arnold Schwarzenegger and the *Terminator* movies. "Scientifically based research" has changed in education from a broadly defined neutral term to a politically loaded term describing one specific type of research design. When ideas or groups are rapidly evolving, changes in meaning can be frequent. Make sure you know the current meaning of words or phrases before you use them.

The words you chose can reveal your underlying beliefs. One reason words can be so powerful is that we often use them to signal loyalty to an idea. For example, choosing to use "African American," rather than "Black" or even "black," says something about your beliefs as does choosing to use "lady" rather than "woman." Exactly what those choices say will differ for different listeners. Find out what associations your audience has with crucial words. Once you know, you can adopt words that are meaningful to them, or use your own choices while being clear about why you chose those words.

How the audience views you is affected by the words you use. Do you use "paradigm shift" or "change"? "pedagogy" or "teaching"? "hegemony" or "powerful influence"? If you are talking to an audience that may be doubtful of your authority or is likely to respect specialized vocabulary, consider using the first choice of each word pair. Otherwise, use the simpler words or phrases. If your target audience is a group that has a specialized jargon, be sure to use it correctly. For example, "mathematics" is the term of choice for most mathematicians while the general public uses "math." Gender researchers will see a paper or a presentation titled "The Status

of Gender Equity in the Mathematics" as targeting them; but a title like "Add It Up: Women, Girls, and Math" targets a broader audience. If you aren't sure that you are using jargon correctly, have someone who knows the jargon double-check your work.

New words (or new meanings) can effectively introduce new ideas

Consistently using different words helps to identify, mark, and maintain conceptual boundaries you think are important. For example, many people use "gender" and "sex" interchangeably. However, distinguishing sex from gender can help people to see there is a concept of gender that is socially constructed. People trying to emphasize this constructed quality use sex to refer to the *biological and physiological* characteristics that *define* men and women and gender to refer to the *socially constructed* roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes a society *considers appropriate* for men and women.[1] Based on your goals, decide what words you want to use when and stick with your choices.

Giving a common word a specific definition can make a new concept seem familiar. Being "fair" is a well-known and widely valued trait. When introducing new audiences to the concept of equity, explaining it as a way of understanding what's fair casts the discussion as a conversation about common sense, not abstract theories. Dr. Eric Jolly accomplishes that here:
> *"You are working with two children, one of whom is a seriously overweight. The other is seriously underweight. Your goal is to bring them both to good health. Is it fair to treat them equally? Will you achieve your goal if you do so? Of course not. Fair is not always equal and equal is not always fair."[2]*

Using catchy phrases or compelling stories can help people remember your preferred definition.

Words and the concepts and social divisions they invoke can evoke strong emotions

Everyone has "hot-button words" to which they have strong, often visceral, positive or negative reactions. "Feminism" is an example of a hot-button word. Most people have strong reactions to it, some positive, some negative. Different groups will have different hot-button words. Calling an adult female a "girl" raises hackles in some groups while it is taken as an indication of informality in others. Find out what the hot-button words are for your audience so you can use them appropriately or not at all.

Before you present or publish on gender and science:

♦ *Develop a sense of your audience*. When you craft a message, be sure you know who your ultimate audience will be, as well as who is conveying your message to that audience (i.e., journalists to their readers, teachers to their students).

♦ *Do your homework.* Find out as much as you can about the kinds of words commonly used and avoided by your target audience and what emotions, divisions, and concepts these words evoke.

♦ *Consider your goals.* Think about which concepts are likely to be new to your audience and which are particularly important. Use this information in your choice of words and phrases.

♦ *Anticipate pitfalls*. For your audience, is it more important that you sound authoritative or approachable? Are there particular parts of your message that are likely to trigger negative reactions? Let your word choices help you avoid or navigate these dangers.

♦ *Prioritize.* There are a lot of things going on here, and sometimes you just have to let some aspects go. Make sure you are making that call deliberately.

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[1]http://www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en/, March 15, 2007.

[2]Eric Jolly personal communication, April 2, 2007.