

# Language That Reinforces Inequality

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*Men solve problems differently than women. Women solve problems differently than men.* At first glance, both sentences communicate the same information. But according to a [2012 study](#) published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, one of these sentences — but not the other — probably reinforces inequality between men and women.

Susanne Bruckmüller, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany, and her coauthors were interested in how the language used to compare people and groups can affect the way those people and groups are perceived. For example, the sentence *Police officers solve problems differently than firefighters*, posits *firefighters* as the “linguistic norm” (Bruckmüller, Hegarty, & Abele, 2012). According to previous research, when two groups of equal status are compared, the evaluator tends to assume that the group positioned as the linguistic norm (in this case firefighters) has more power and higher status than the other group, whose relationship is presented as an “effect to be explained” (in this case police officers) by its relationship to the linguistic norm (Bruckmüller, Hegarty, & Abele, 2012).

The study authors reviewed previous research showing that characteristics such as being in the majority and having privileged social status make some groups of people — for example, men, white people, and straight people — more likely to be viewed and described as “the norm.” To study how these linguistic patterns might contribute to real-life power disparities, Bruckmüller and her coauthors asked study participants to read either a text about differences between men and women’s leadership styles or a text about differences between men and women’s preferred leisure activities. Some of the participants in each group read a version of the text that treated men as the linguistic norm to which women were compared; the others read a version of the text that treated women as the linguistic norm to which men were compared. After reading the text, participants completed a survey about disparities in status between men and women.

After reading a text about leadership style in which men, as opposed to women, were treated as the linguistic norm, participants were more likely to indicate that status differences between the two genders were large and legitimate. They were also more likely to apply gender stereotypes. However, reading a text about leisure time activities in which men were treated as the linguistic norm did not result in an increased likelihood that participants would accept gender differences and apply stereotypes.

According to the study authors, these results may show that treating high-status groups as the linguistic norm reinforces negative stereotypes only in the contexts where disparity actually exists — such is the case for leadership but not for leisure activities. Furthermore, the authors pointed out the importance of balancing the need for fair language with the need for clear communication in scientific writing. They suggested that, where possible, scientists use *more than* comparisons rather than *less than* comparisons because certain research suggests that “readers tend to evaluate *more than* comparisons more positively” (Bruckmüller, Hegarty, & Abele, 2012).

Bruckmüller, S., Hegarty, P., & Abele, A. (2012). Framing gender differences: Linguistic normativity affects perceptions of power and gender stereotypes *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 42 (2), 210-218 DOI: [10.1002/ejsp.858](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.858)