

Editorial Policy on the Use of the Terms “Sex” and “Gender”

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As Zoë Peterson and Charlene Muehlenhard (2011, this issue) elaborated, there is a long history of debate about the use of the terms “gender” and “sex” in the field of feminist psychology, as well as more generally in all psychological and social science research related to women and gender studies. They further noted that the generally preferred term now in psychology is “gender,” based on Rhoda Unger’s (1979) persuasive article. However, both terms are widely used, often interchangeably. Peterson and Muehlenhard conclude that the distinction will become less and less important over time.

Others have suggested that we should take a definite viewpoint. In their chapter, titled “Words matter: The language of gender,” Smith et al. (2010) argued that the words we use affect how we think about issues and to what we pay attention. Many details are provided by Smith et al. about the naming of issues and how this affects the discourse regarding these issues within U.S. feminist thought. Based in these arguments and on Unger (1979), as past and present editors of *Sex Roles*, we believe that routine use of the term “sex” in the journals’ pages would suggest that the authors and editors believe that any

differences in behavior and abilities are rooted in biology and that the journal’s reviewers and editors prefer essentialist and/or evolutionary approaches. Although it is impossible ever to know how much of human behavior is innate or biological and how much is learned or otherwise influenced by the environment or cultural context, we ask our authors to use the term “gender” because its implications are clearly broader and more inclusive than those of the term “sex.” This policy was developed by Sue Rosenberg Zalk during her editorship. As she routinely wrote in her letters to authors:

Please use the word “gender” not “sex” (unless referring to “sexual” behaviors/feelings). Sex (e.g., sex roles, sex differences) implies biological distinctions and causes, while “gender” recognizes cultural and experiential factors (S. R. Zalk, personal communication, July 1998).

Although this journal is called *Sex Roles*, it has been argued that a better title would be *Gender Roles* (e.g., Chrisler 2007; Donelson 1999). We agree with this viewpoint and have explored the possibility of changing the title of the journal. However, in conversations about this matter with our publisher, Springer, we were told that a change in the title of the journal essentially makes this a new journal, and we would lose our long history of publication over more than 35 years. This would be confusing to our potential authors and to our readers. All journal statistics, such as the impact factor, would need to be totally redone, based only on issues published under the new title. Thus, we continue with a somewhat inappropriate title, but one with a long and valuable history.

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