

POSTPRINT

Backlash Over Gender-Fair Language: The Impact of Feminine Job Titles on Men's and Women's Perception of Women

Magdalena Budziszewska¹
Karolina Hansen²
Michał Bilewicz²

Abstract: Feminine forms of job titles raise great interest in many countries. However, it is still unknown how they shape stereotypical impressions on warmth and competence dimensions among female and male listeners. In an experiment with fictitious job titles men perceived women described with feminine job titles as significantly less warm and marginally less competent than women with masculine job titles, which led to lower willingness to employ them. No such effects were observed among women.

Keywords: gender-fair language, impression formation, stereotype content model, social identity theory, discrimination

“Please call me *ministra*,” announced the Polish Minister of Sport and Tourism, Joanna Mucha, in one of the most influential talk shows on Polish television. Minister Mucha used the feminine linguistic form of her governmental post, a form very rarely used in natural Polish language. This statement garnered diverse responses in Poland's public discourse. Even among academics the statement was variously received: ranging from an enthusiastic response from a feminist philosopher, Magdalena Środa, to harsh

¹The Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education, Warsaw, Poland

²University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

Corresponding Author:

Karolina Hansen, Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw, ul. Stawki 5/7, 00-183 Warsaw, Poland. Email: karolina.hansen@psych.uw.edu.pl

criticism from a linguist, Jerzy Bralczyk, who called this utterance “a rape on the Polish language” (Majak, 2012).

In the current research, we address the differences between men and women in the perception of feminine job titles. Relevant findings on job attitudes show that masculine pronouns used in job descriptions differentially affect women’s and men’s ratings of such jobs (e.g., Stericker, 1981). In our experiment we assessed whether men and women react differently to feminine job titles, and whether their perception of feminine job titles is linked to discriminatory processes.

Gender-Fair Language and Job Titles

The usage of feminine job titles deserves more attention by researchers as it becomes one of the crucial topics in gender-related debate in many countries (Formanowicz, Bedyńska, Cisiak, Braun, & Szczesny, 2013; Jessell & Beymer, 1992; Stericker, 1981).

Most of the research on gender-fair language has been performed on English speakers. Many languages are androcentrically asymmetric: The masculine form of a word is standard and refers to both males and females, while the feminine form is derived from the male standard, and by using it one refers only to females (Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, & Szczesny, 2007). Research has shown that masculine generics evoke more associations with males (for a review, see Stahlberg et al., 2007). Instead of saying “musicians” or “politicians,” using parallel forms such as “male and female musicians” or “male and female politicians” helps to mentally activate female exemplars of the given category and makes females more visible (e.g., in Polish Bojarska, 2011; in German Stahlberg, Szczesny, & Braun, 2001).

Feminine noun forms influence also perception of women described with them. An Italian study (Merkel, Maass, & Frommelt, 2012) showed that women described with feminine job titles (e.g., *la presidentessa*, female president) were perceived as having lower status but as being warmer than women described with a masculine title (e.g., *la presidente*). However, there were no differences in the perception of these women’s competence. Furthermore, participants’ gender did not influence the effects.

A recent Polish study on fictional job titles showed that a woman with a feminine job title was evaluated generally less favorably than a woman with a masculine title (Formanowicz et al., 2013). Participants’ political attitudes moderated the effect: Conservatives devalued the applicant with a feminine job title more than liberals. Participants’ gender, however, did not influence the evaluations. Regrettably, the study did not focus on stereotyping and did not have specific predictions about the evaluation of women with a feminine job title on the dimensions of warmth and competence. In all three studies the authors computed a single index consisting of warmth, competence, and employability items intermixed (Formanowicz et al., 2013). Therefore, these studies did not allow for measurement of ambivalent sexist beliefs about warmth and competence of the applicant and insight into the possible mechanisms of this discrimination as influenced by participants’ inferences about women using feminine job titles.

Social Identity and Stereotype Content Aspects of Feminine Job Titles

Social identity theory proposes that when group categories are made salient, intergroup biases become more pronounced, and outgroup perception becomes more negative and simplified (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Feminine forms of job titles make gender categories salient. Thus, they can lead to more pronounced social identity processes, such as greater outgroup derogation and ingroup bias among men, whereas among women such forms could lead to higher attempts for group affirmation (for a review see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002).

Gender-fair language research suggests that there are differences between men and women in attitudes toward such language: Women opt for inclusive language, while men prefer the more exclusive, male-generic forms (in Hong Kong English, Lee, 2007; in American English, Parks & Robertson, 2005). These general differences in men's and women's reaction to feminine job titles could be particularly interesting in the domain of stereotyping. Traditionally, psychology has treated prejudice as a uniform negativity toward outgroups (Allport, 1954), but more recent psychological theories distinguish different dimensions of prejudice, allowing for its ambivalent forms. According to the stereotype content model (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), people categorize outgroups on two main dimensions—warmth (likeability) and competence (status, power). The same aspects, sometimes also conceptualized as affiliation and assertiveness dimension, play crucial role in the intergender communication (Palomares, 2012). Housewives and women in traditional gender roles are perceived as high in warmth, but low in competence (Fiske et al., 2002). Men and women differ in their perceptions of working women on these two dimensions. In an American study, male, but not female, participants described female managers as negative on both competence- and warmth-related traits (Deal & Stevenson, 1998).

Research has shown that high-status groups express generally stronger ingroup bias than do low-status groups (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Based on the above, we predict that men's reactions to feminine job titles will be negative, regardless of the stereotype dimension or specific content. This is supported by literature on the backlash effect (Rudman & Glick, 1999), which describes high bias against agentic women among men exposed to a feminized job description. Among women the increased salience of femininity (as in feminine job titles) can have different effects: for them, it can be related to self-stereotyping and social identity management strategies. Here, making the low-status social identity salient can lead to complementary stereotyping that allows one to perceive losses in competence but maintain positive in-group perception on the dimension of warmth (Jost & Kay, 2005). Based on the above arguments, we expect that feminine job titles—by making the gender category salient—will lead to general ingroup bias among men (on both competence and warmth dimensions), but to more nuanced perceptions among women (lower competence but not warmth).

The content of a stereotype can have far-reaching consequences, such as specific intergroup behaviors (Cuddy et al., 2008). In the aforementioned study by Formanowicz

et al. (2013), a women described with a feminine job title was less readily hired than a woman with a masculine job title. Therefore, we expected women described with feminine job titles to be less employable than those with masculine job titles.

Current Research

The present experiment was designed to determine how masculine and feminine job titles describing women shift the perception of these women on two stereotype content dimensions: warmth and competence. We introduced an artificial job title (in its feminine or masculine form) in order to avoid content-based inferences. In addition to asking participants for warmth and competence evaluations, we assessed their behavioral intentions in employing women with feminine job titles. We intended to establish an indirect link between the linguistic utterance, stereotyping, and behavioral consequences of such utterance.

Based on social identity theory, as well as stereotype content research, we hypothesized that using feminine forms of fictional job titles will make women appear less competent (than when using masculine job titles) both in the eyes of men and women and less warm in the eyes of men. We expected also that specific stereotypes induced among men and women could have a differential impact on discrimination of women described using feminine job titles.

Method

Participants

Participants of the study were 123 (60 male) users of an Internet polling panel platform. As age can influence attitudes toward gender-fair language (Parks & Robertson, 2005) and we did not aim at focusing on age differences, we recruited only middle-aged participants (range: 29-40 years, $M = 33.59$, $SD = 3.48$). The sample was diverse and included participants from various parts of Poland and representing all stages of education.

Procedure

Participants of the online study were presented with one of two nearly identical stories, randomly assigned. The stories were titled "In the year 2110" and started with a sentence "Marta, a 42 year old woman lives in a big city and is an *aborolożka* by profession." In one condition, the woman's profession had a feminine form of a fictitious job title (*aborolożka*); in the other condition, a masculine form (*aborolog*). The story was followed by measures of all dependent variables.

To prevent the influence of a specific word stem, we used five different fictitious job titles (in masculine/feminine forms): *aborolog/aborolożka*, *hagerolog/hagerolożka*, *kemelog/kemelożka*, *nirolog/nirolożka*, *nunolog/nunolożka*. Each participant read only one story with only one title. As there was no effect of any specific word stem on

any of the dependent variables in the study ($F_s < 1$), we averaged the answers for all of them.

Measures

Warmth and Competence. Attributions of warmth (warm, sensible, caring, and loving, $\alpha = .94$) and competence (competent, ambitious, assertive, and strong, $\alpha = .87$), were measured on Likert-type scales from 0 = *not at all* to 10 = *very much* (Fiske et al., 2002; in Polish Winiewski, 2010). The warmth and competence items were mixed and presented in random order.

Employability. After participants were asked how likely they would use the occupational service offered by the target woman and whether they would employ her (0 = *definitely not*, 10 = *definitely yes*). As the two questions were highly correlated, $r(121) = .71$, $p < .001$, we averaged the answers and created a composite index of discriminatory intentions in employability.

Results

Competence Perceptions

In order to examine the effects of the linguistic form of the job title and the gender of participants on perceptions of competence, we conducted a 2 (linguistic form: masculine vs. feminine) \times 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) between-subjects ANOVA (analysis of variance). Results showed that, as expected, women described with feminine job titles (ending with *-lozka*) were perceived as less competent ($M = 8.03$, $SD = 2.53$) than those described with masculine job titles (ending with *-log*; $M = 8.70$, $SD = 2.68$), $F(1, 119) = 4.08$, $p = .046$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$ (Figure 1). Results also showed that, overall, male participants evaluated all described women as less competent than did female participants, $F(1, 119) = 8.43$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. The interaction of job title form and gender of participants was not significant, $F < 1$, which shows that feminine job titles make women appear less competent (than when using a masculine job title) in the eyes of both men and women.

Warmth Perceptions

A similar 2 \times 2 ANOVA for warmth showed that neither linguistic form of the job title itself, $F < 1$, nor the gender of participants, $F(1, 119) = 1.30$, $p = .26$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, influenced warmth perceptions of the presented women (Figure 1). However, and as expected, an interaction of linguistic form and gender of participants did influence the evaluations, $F(1, 119) = 5.53$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Simple effects analyses with Bonferroni's corrections showed that there was no significant difference between male and female participants in perceptions of warmth of women with masculine job titles, $F < 1$. However, there was a difference in warmth perceptions of women with feminine

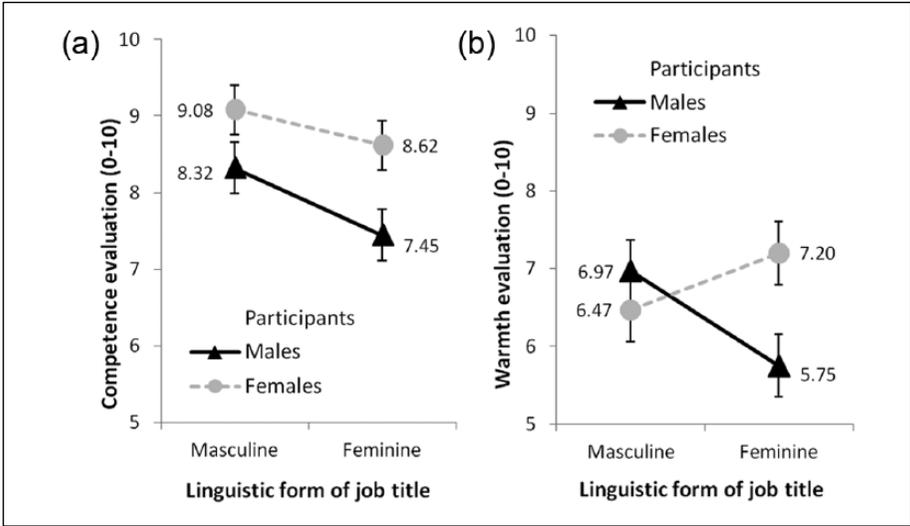


Figure 1. Mean competence (a) and warmth (b) perceptions by linguistic form of job title (masculine, feminine) and participant gender (male, female).

Note. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

job titles, $F(1, 119) = 6.48, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = .05$: female participants perceived such women as warmer than male participants did. Furthermore, male participants perceived women with feminine job titles as less warm than those with masculine job titles, $F(1, 119) = 4.19, p = .043, \eta_p^2 = .03$. Female participants did not make such a distinction, $F(1, 119) = 1.61, p = .21, \eta_p^2 = .01$. Moreover, descriptive statistics (Figure 1) showed that women with feminine job titles were perceived by other women as slightly warmer than those with masculine job titles.

Indirect Effects

In order to test how feminine job titles can affect the two dimensions of stereotype content, and how the stereotype content affects men's and women's intentions to employ a women described with feminine job titles, we tested a moderated mediation model. Employability was a dependent variable, feminine versus masculine job title was a dichotomous independent variable, perceptions of warmth and competence were simultaneous mediators and participant's gender was a dichotomous moderator (Hayes, 2013; Model 8).

The moderated mediation was tested using SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) with 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval (CI) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. The analysis revealed that there was no significant direct effect of linguistic form on employability of women, neither among female participants, $b = -0.53, SE(\text{boot}) = 0.50, CI = [-1.52, -0.46]$, nor among male participants, $b = 0.40, SE(\text{boot}) =$

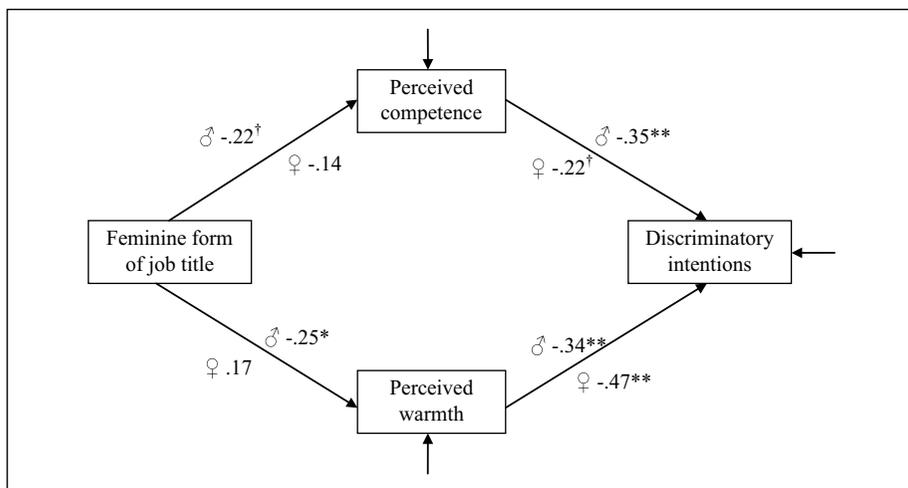


Figure 2. Indirect effects of feminine job titles on discriminatory intentions in employability for male participants (standardized regression coefficients above arrows) and female participants (below arrows).

$^{\dagger}p < .1$. $*p < .05$. $**p < .01$.

0.52, $CI = [-0.63, 1.43]$. For female participants there was also no significant indirect effect: neither through competence, $b = -0.15$, $SE(\text{boot}) = 0.17$, $CI = [-0.59, 0.09]$, nor through warmth, $b = 0.32$, $SE(\text{boot}) = 0.25$, $CI = [-0.14, 0.85]$. For male participants there was an indirect effect of feminine job title on employability through warmth, $b = -0.53$, $SE(\text{boot}) = 0.30$, $CI = [-1.23, -0.03]$, but the indirect effect through competence did not reach significance, $b = -0.28$, $SE(\text{boot}) = 0.21$, $CI = [-0.85, 0.0004]$. The overall moderated mediation test proved significant for warmth as a mediator, $b = -0.84$, $SE(\text{boot}) = 0.39$, $CI = [-1.71, -0.17]$, but not for competence, $b = -0.14$, $SE(\text{boot}) = 0.24$, $CI = [-0.73, 0.24]$.

In order to assess the specific standardized effects in the moderated mediation model we performed a two-group (male vs. female participants) path analysis with IBM AMOS software (Figure 2). The tested model provided a good fit to the data, $\chi^2 = 2.04$, $p = .36$, confirmatory fit index = .99, root mean residual = .04, root mean square error of approximation = .01.

As earlier shown in ANOVAs, male participants who were faced with a description of a woman with a feminine job title perceived such a woman as marginally less competent ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = .08$) and less warm ($\beta = -0.25$, $p = .046$) than a woman with a masculine job title. Deprivation of warmth and competence led to more discriminatory intentions toward such women (for competence $\beta = -0.35$, $p = .003$; for warmth $\beta = -0.34$, $p = .003$).

For female participants, feminine job titles did not significantly reduce perceived competence of women described with such titles ($\beta = -0.14$, $p = .28$), neither did they reduce perceived warmth of such women ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = .19$). However, female

participants' discriminatory intentions toward women described with feminine job titles were dependent on the perception of the described women's warmth ($\beta = -0.47$, $p = .001$) and competence ($\beta = -0.22$, $p = .05$).

Discussion

The current study showed that using a job title with an explicitly gender-marked word ending to describe female professionals evokes different stereotyping of such women in the eyes of men and women. This stereotype was a generally negative one among men (denying competence and warmth) and a complementary one among women (partially denying competence, but not warmth). Thus, women described using feminine job titles were less competent in the eyes of men and women, but less warm only in the eyes of men.

Such complementary process in women perceiving other women in professional roles would be described by social identity theorists as a defensive strategy of low status groups (e.g., Ellemers et al., 2002), whereas system justification theorists would explain it as a hierarchy maintaining strategy among the disadvantaged (Douglas & Sutton, 2014; Kay & Jost, 2003). An alternative explanation of the observed effects can be due to perception of women using feminine job titles as having feminist views. Some studies suggest that feminists are often depicted as cold but competent (Berryman-Fink & Verderber, 1985; Fiske et al., 2002). However, in our study men perceived women described with a feminine job title as both cold and incompetent and women did not perceive them as cold. The perception of women described with feminine job titles could be a combination of traditional sexist depiction of women as incompetent and gender-dependent perception of feminists: by men perceived as cold and by women as rather warm. This factor should be included as a possible moderator in the future studies.

In the present study, we used fictional, nonexistent job titles to capture the effect of linguistic form not influenced by attitudes toward existing, contextually rich professions. This can explain the differences between our results and those of Merkel et al. (2012), who observed higher warmth, but not lowered competence in a similar research in Italy. They used female forms of existing professions (e.g., female president or soldier) and it is possible that participants inferred high competences from the profession itself. Different social identity processes and stereotyping among female and male participants had also specific consequences for discriminatory intentions toward women described with feminine job titles. In case of female participants, the lower perceived competence of women described with feminine job titles did not lead to negative behavioral intentions toward such women. It seems that women's complementary stereotyping strategy does not lead to legitimization of other women's discrimination. However, in case of male participants the negative perception of women with feminine job titles (particularly the denial of warmth) led to discriminatory intentions. This is in line with the concept of hostile sexism, stressing that men faced with career women react with uniformly negative stereotyping that leads to resentment-based discriminatory practices toward successful women (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

This whole process reminds of a commons dilemma (Hardin, 1968): What is good for a group and its members in the long term might be bad for an individual in the short term. On the one hand, women as a group would profit if all individual women used feminine job titles because this would make women as a group more visible, and by frequent use make the job titles sound less unfamiliar. On the other hand, for an individual woman a female job title comes with negative stereotypes, particularly in the eyes of men.

Acknowledgments

We thank Adrian Wójcik, Paulina Górka, and Małgorzata Mikołajczak for their work in the initial phase of this project. We also thank the editor Howard Giles and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on a previous version of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by the Foundation for Polish Science Focus grant (FNP FG 2/2009) awarded to Michał Bilewicz. Writing of this article by Karolina Hansen was supported by Polish National Science Centre grant Fuga (DEC-2013/08/S/HS6/00573).

References

- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Oxford, England: Addison-Wesley.
- Berryman-Fink, C., & Verderber, K. S. (1985). Attributions of the term feminist: A factor analytic development of a measuring instrument. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 9*, 51-64.
- Bojarska, K. (2011). Wpływ androcentrycznych i inkluzywnych płciowo konstrukcji językowych na skojarzenia z płcią [Influence of androcentric and gender-inclusive lexical constructions on gender-associational responses]. *Studia Psychologiczne, 49*, 53-68.
- Cuddy, A. J. C., Fiske, S. T., & Glick, P. (2008). Warmth and competence as universal dimensions of social perception: The stereotype content model and the BIAS map. In M. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 40, pp. 61-149). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Deal, J. J., & Stevenson, M. A. (1998). Perceptions of female and male managers in the 1990s: Plus ça change. *Sex Roles, 38*, 287-300.
- Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2014). "A giant leap for mankind" but what about women? The role of system-justifying ideologies in predicting attitudes toward sexist language. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0261927X14538638
- Ellemers, N., Spears, R., & Doosje, B. (2002). Self and social identity. *Annual Review of Psychology, 53*, 161-186.

- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J. C., Glick, P., & Xu, J. (2002). A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: Competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*, 878-902.
- Formanowicz, M., Bedyńska, S., Cislak, A., Braun, F., & Sczesny, S. (2013). Side effects of gender-fair language: How feminine job titles influence the evaluation of female applicants. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *43*, 62-71.
- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (2003). An ambivalent alliance: Hostile and benevolent sexism as complementary justifications for gender inequality. *American Psychologist*, *56*, 109-118.
- Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science*, *162*, 1243-1248.
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Jessell, J. C., & Beymer, L. (1992). The effects of job title vs. job description on occupational sex typing. *Sex Roles*, *27*, 73-83.
- Jost, J. T., & Kay, A. C. (2005). Exposure to benevolent sexism and complementary gender stereotypes: Consequences for specific and diffuse forms of system justification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *88*, 498-509.
- Kay, A. C., & Jost, J. T. (2003). Complementary justice: Effects of 'poor but happy' and 'poor but honest' stereotype exemplars on system justification and implicit activation of the justice motive. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *85*, 823-837.
- Lee, J. F. K. (2007). Acceptability of sexist language among young people in Hong Kong. *Sex Roles*, *56*, 285-295.
- Majak, K. (2012). *Mucha rewolucjonizuje język polski* [Mucha revolutionises Polish language]. *Na:temat*. Retrieved from <http://natemat.pl/2821,joanna-mucha-rewolucjonizuje-jezyk-polski>.
- Merkel, E., Maass, A., & Frommelt, L. (2012). Shielding women against status loss: The masculine form and its alternatives in the Italian language. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *31*, 311-320.
- Palomares, N. A. (2012). Gender and intergroup communication. In H. Giles (Ed.), *The handbook of intergroup communication* (pp. 197-210). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Parks, J. B., & Robertson, M. A. (2005). Explaining age and gender effects on attitudes toward sexist language. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *24*, 401-411.
- Rudman, L. A., & Glick, P. (1999). Feminized management and backlash toward agentic women: The hidden costs to women of a kinder, gentler image of middle managers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *77*, 1004-1010.
- Stahlberg, D., Braun, F., Irmen, L., & Sczesny, S. (2007). Representation of the sexes in language. In K. Fiedler (Ed.), *Social communication* (pp. 163-187). New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Stahlberg, D., Sczesny, S., & Braun, F. (2001). Name your favorite musician: Effects of masculine generics and of their alternatives in German. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *20*, 464-469.
- Stericker, A. (1981). Does this "he or she" business really make a difference? The effect of masculine pronouns as generics on job attitudes. *Sex Roles*, *7*, 637-641.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7-24). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.
- Winiewski, H. M. (2010). *Ciepło i kompetencja jako struktura treści stereotypów* [Warmth and competence as a structure of stereotype content] (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland.

Author Biographies

Magdalena Budziszewska is an assistant professor at the Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education in Warsaw. She studies family and biographical narratives, as well as collective emotional narratives. Linking qualitative and quantitative research methods, she also investigates linguistic aspects of social cognition.

Karolina Hansen is an assistant professor at the University of Warsaw. Her research interests are in the fields of social psychology, sociolinguistics, and cross-cultural psychology, and include topics such as language and accent attitudes, stereotyping, gender-fair language, linguistic biases, and cross-cultural differences in social cognition.

Michał Bilewicz is an associate professor at the University of Warsaw and director of the Center for Research on Prejudice at the same institution. He is interested in social psychology of intergroup relations, dehumanization and inhumanization processes, contact hypothesis and prejudice reduction, as well as linguistic aspects of discrimination.