

Good-Bye, You Guys Sherryl Kleinman

I hear it everywhere.

I press the button on the answering machine and a friend's voice says, "Hope you guys are doing well." I sit down with a friend at a restaurant, and the server asks, "What would you guys like to drink?" A student in my gender class looks out over a group of thirty-five women and five men and says, "You guys, I have an announcement."

Not that long ago women were being told that "he" and "mankind" included us--but we were skeptical. Feminists--women and men--argued that language matters, that words are the tools of thought, and that erasing women through terms like "mankind" made it easier to treat women as less than persons. Remember the uproar when women asserted our existence by demanding "she or he" and "humankind?" But feminists persisted and our language changed. Postal carrier, first-year student, chairperson, and firefighter slowly made their way onto paper and into speech. Many people began to see that it's a problem when the so-called generic person has a man's face.

So when did "you guys" sneak by and then sneak in? I suspect it entered the scene around the time that official titles like "chairman" were being challenged. You can push the provost to change freshman to first-year student or complain to publishers about their use of congressman in text books. But you can't go to court to make your friends stop using "you guys."

Some women tell me that "you guys" is different from "mankind." It's informal. It makes everyone feel included. It's an equalizer. As one woman put it, "It's friendly. It's not like calling us sluts or bitches."

That's what worries me. Too many of us believe "you guys" is benign. But imagine a world--as Douglas Hofstadter did in his 1986 satire on sexist language--where people used generics based on race rather than gender. In that world, people would use "freshwhite," "chairwhite," and yes, "you whiteys." Substituting "white" for "man" makes it easy to see why using "man" for all human beings is wrong.

Perhaps some women believe that being "one of the guys" will protect them from the hazards of being women. "You guys" provides the guise of inclusion in the dominant group. But if women really had equal status with men, we wouldn't have to disappear into their term. After all, can you think of one, just one, instance when a female term has been used to describe a group of women and men? Can you even imagine that happening?

I'm not saying that those of us who use "you guys" have bad intentions. But let's consider the consequences. Think about the messages we get about the value of women--hundreds of times a day, every day--when we hear it. So let's recognize (as feminists did with "mankind") that a friendly-sounding phrase like "you guys" can do damage.

I think about my colleague's five year-old daughter who ran out of the room crying when she heard the teacher say, "What do you guys think?" She thought the teacher didn't care about what *she* thought. The teacher told her that of course she was included. Her tears stopped, but what was the lesson? She learned that her opinion as a girl counts only when she's a guy. She learned, as most of us have, that men set the standard.

I think about my friend's six year-old son who refused to believe that the female firefighter who came to his school to talk to the class--dressed in uniform--actually fought fires. The firefighter repeatedly referred to herself as a "fireman." Despite the protests of the teacher and the firefighter, the boy would not be convinced. "A fireman can't be a woman," he said. His mother, who is fastidious in her use of nonsexist language, had a tough time doing damage control.

Several months ago I was complaining, as usual, about the "you guys" problem. "What we need is a card that explains why we don't want to be called guys!" Smita Varia, a veteran of my gender course, said, "Let's write one."

And so we did. Smita enlisted T. Christian Helms, another former student, to design a graphic for the card. The final result is what you see [here](#). We hope you'll agree that the card doesn't scold people. Give it to friends and ask them to think about it. Leave it with a big tip after you've been "you guysed" during a meal. The card explains the problem and offers alternatives. You can also access the layout of the card from our website: <http://www.youall.freeservers.com>.

It's impossible to legislate against "you guys," so I'm calling for no less than an anti-you guys movement. Does that sound silly? If so, maybe it's because many of us secretly believe that guys are better. And the guys know they're better, too. If you don't believe me, saunter up to a group of them and offer a friendly, "hey, gals, how're you doing?" Let me know what happens.

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