

# College Students' Perceptions of Gender-Inclusive Language Use Predict Attitudes Toward Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Individuals

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## Abstract

*Transgender* and *gender nonconforming* (TGNC) individuals face negative consequences linked to prejudice, including homelessness and violence. One medium that perpetuates prejudice toward TGNC individuals is our choice in language. Biased language is related to prejudiced attitudes. Use of gender-inclusive language, however, promotes gender equality. Previous research has examined gender-inclusive language use regarding cisgender men and women, but little work has focused on gender-inclusive language use regarding TGNC individuals. Two studies explored the connections between attitudes toward transgender individuals and perceptions of TGNC-inclusive language. Three hierarchical linear regressions and a mini meta-analysis were conducted. Results suggest that people with negative attitudes toward transgender individuals perceive greater difficulty in using gender-inclusive language. These findings suggest that inclusive language use may be indicative of more positive attitudes.

## Keywords

transgender, gender nonconforming, gender-inclusive language, attitudes toward transgender individuals

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*Transgender and gender nonconforming* (TGNC) is an umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity or expression diverges from the social norms and expectations associated with one's assigned sex at birth (i.e., male or female; Morgan & Stevens, 2008). The term *transgender*, according to Sally Hines (2010), "denotes a range of gender, subjectivities, and presentations that all across, between, and beyond stable categories of 'man' and 'woman'" (p. 1). Morgan and Stevens' (2008) work showed that individuals often experience a disconnect between mind and body, as well as incongruencies between their gender expression in the form of dress and preferred activities (Brown & Rounsley, 1996; Morgan & Stevens, 2008). Research demonstrates that individuals often have a fluid experience of gender, one that is less stable and dichotomous than previously thought (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Kozee, Tylka, & Bauerband, 2012). Extant study also shows that TGNC identity development is a complex process that includes not only individual self-identification but also the development of a social identity by which one is known (Bilodeau, 2005). In contrast to TGNC individuals, individuals whose gender identity or expression resonates with their sex assigned at birth are known as *cisgender* (Bauer et al., 2009).

The estimated percentage of the U.S. population who identify as TGNC has nearly doubled over the past 5 years, from .3% in 2011 (Gates, 2012) to .6% (1.4 million individuals) in 2016 (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016). However, it is likely that this number is much higher. Census surveys rarely get an accurate count of TGNC individuals, as surveys only include the female/male binary associated with one's assigned sex at birth, rendering TGNC individuals virtually invisible. Even if individuals were given the ability to identify as TGNC, societal stigma prevents many from endorsing their true identity (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). Despite increased visibility of injustices against TGNC individuals, significant prejudice still exists (Norton & Herek, 2013).

## Prejudice Against TGNC Individuals

Systemic prejudice toward TGNC individuals, also called *cissexism* (Grollman, 2012), is pervasive. In U.S. society (among others), gender is one of the major organizational forces by which individuals are assigned roles and expectations. When individuals do not fit into the gender assigned to them at birth, this leaves little room for them to exist (Gagne, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997). For many individuals whose identities fit into the traditional man/woman binary, this leads to increased pressure to "pass," or appear as if one was assigned their lived gender at birth, in order to avoid detection and negative consequences for being TGNC (Pfeffer, 2016). For individuals whose experience of gender is more fluid and unstable, this can make it hard to move through the world and can lead to increased discrimination.

The National Center for Transgender Equality (2016b) approximates that 20% of TGNC individuals will face homelessness in their lives, compared to less than 9% of the general population (Nock et al., 2008). TGNC individuals also face discrimination in employment. An estimated 26% of individuals have lost a job due to their transgender identity, while over 75% have faced discrimination and stigma in the workplace

(National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016a). Moreover, health and safety is a concern for TGNC individuals. An estimated 41% of all TGNC individuals in the United States have attempted suicide (Haas, Rodgers, & Herman, 2014). Comparatively, between 1.9% and 8.7% of the general population have ever attempted suicide (Nock et al., 2008).

Furthermore, TGNC individuals are at increased risk for hate violence. A study of transgender college students revealed that a majority experienced a hostile environment on campus (McKinney, 2005). Furthermore, trans women are almost two times more likely to experience sexual violence than cisgender women (Anti-Violence Project, 2016). Murder of TGNC individuals has sharply increased over the past several years; rates are particularly high for trans women of color (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). Unfortunately, most states do not classify violence toward TGNC as a hate crime (Movement Advancement Project, 2017).

A number of characteristics have been linked to endorsement of negative attitudes toward TGNC. First, gender has been shown to predict attitudes toward TGNC individuals among cisgender people, such that men have more negative attitudes than women (Norton & Herek, 2013; Woodford, Silverschanz, Swank, Scherrer, & Raiz, 2012). Furthermore, political ideology (i.e., conservatism or liberalism) predicts cissexism. Individuals who hold more conservative views are more likely to have negative attitudes toward TGNC individuals, while more liberal people are likely to have less negative attitudes (Norton & Herek, 2013; Woodford et al., 2012). Finally, personal experiences may play a role in attitudes toward TGNC individuals. People who are acquainted with someone who identifies as TGNC have less cissexist beliefs, compared with those who are not (Norton & Herek, 2013; Woodford et al., 2012). Personal characteristics that might affect attitudes toward TGNC individuals are important to consider when examining attitudes toward TGNC people.

One way that cissexism is expressed is through language (Collins & Clément, 2012). Much language used in modern society is gender-biased, meaning that masculine generics are commonplace and promote images of cisgender men as the standard, average human being (Gastil, 1990). Gender-inclusive language uses gender-neutral terms to describe someone (e.g., humanity and police officer), and is related to increased gender equality and decreased sexism (Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, & Laakso, 2012; Sarrasin, Gabriel, & Gygax, 2012). Languages that use masculine generics perpetuate perceptions that men and masculinity are the standard in society, while erasing women and TGNC individuals from social conventions and narratives (Cameron, 1998). Furthermore, most existing literature on gendered language and equity has focused on the traditional woman/man binary, which serves to further erase TGNC identities and perpetuate stigma for diverging from expected social gender norms.

One way to mitigate this prejudice is to examine the language we use to talk about gender. Previous research has shown connections between gendered language systems (e.g., languages that include masculine generics) and sexist attitudes regarding cisgender women, as well as relationships between sexism and attitudes toward gender-inclusive language (Sarrasin et al., 2012). Moreover, gender-inclusive language use has been found to be an effortful, conscious process (Koeser, Kuhn, & Sczesny, 2015;

Koeser & Sczesny, 2014). However, TGNC individuals have been largely left out of this discussion. By better understanding how individuals perceive gender-inclusive language and how their perceptions connect to cissexism, we may be able to encourage increased gender-inclusive language use and reduce negative outcomes for TGNC populations.

## Gender and Language

Language drives our mental representations of individuals and can evoke images of masculinity and femininity (see Stahlberg et al., 2007, for a review). Such language is often based on knowledge of gender roles in society (Oakhill, Garnham, & Reynolds, 2005; Sczesny, Formanowicz, & Moser, 2016). For instance, many profession words in the English language carry gendered meaning, such as *nurse* or *mechanic*. Thus, it appears that gendered expectations prime people to think in gendered ways. In androcentric societies that view male-as-normative, this can lead to social discrimination (Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). This is evidenced by higher levels of sexism found within cultures whose languages use grammatical gendering, where nouns are gendered male or female (e.g., Spain, France; Wasserman & Weseley, 2009). In contrast, societies that use gender-inclusive language (also called *gender-neutral* or *gender-fair* language) demonstrate more parity between cisgender men and women (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) explored the use of gender-inclusive language in connection to female equality in 134 countries. Overall, this work found that countries that used gender-inclusive language or genderless language had greater gender parity compared with countries that use a gendered language system (Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012). While these results should be interpreted cautiously—one cannot determine whether the connection between language structure and sexism is due to the language structure itself or sociohistorical events (Gabriel & Gyax, 2016)—they do suggest a significant connection between the language used in a society and members' attitudes regarding gender. This connection between language and social attitudes is a useful lens through which to examine stereotyping, as well as factors that might lead individuals to using gender-inclusive language.

## Language and Stereotyping

As previously suggested, there is a connection between the structure of languages used in a society and prejudice. Beyond the structure of language (i.e., those with grammatical gender vs. those without), the very words we use have the power to promote prejudice in the form of stereotypes. The use of biased language, such as racist slurs or sexist statements, can perpetuate stereotypes and breed discriminatory behaviors, whereas unbiased language can promote positive outcomes. For instance, some work has shown that individuals' stereotypes toward out-group members are both expressed and perpetuated through language. Findings related to the linguistic intergroup bias (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989) demonstrate that individuals are more likely to describe an out-group member's negative actions in global, abstract terms (e.g., "he is

a cheater”), which subtly reveals the speaker’s stereotypical view of the out-group member as inherently bad. Moreover, the use of abstract language conveys to the listener that such negative characteristics are due to stable, inherent qualities of out-group members and that such behaviors are typical of the group (e.g., “You know how *they* are”). In this way, propensities to describe negative out-group behaviors in global, abstract language both express and perpetuate negative stereotypes. This research planted the seeds for the linguistic expectancy bias (Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2000), which states that stereotyped behavior is described more abstractly than nonstereotyped behavior. That is, stereotyped behavior is described as a reflection of the characteristics of an individual as opposed to the situation.

Some research has confirmed the connection between language and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. For example, when asked to tell stories about male and female friends performing gender-stereotyped behaviors, individuals communicated gender-congruent behaviors more abstractly than noncongruent behaviors (Wigboldus et al., 2000). That is, a woman’s stereotypically feminine behavior was attributed to her innate feminine characteristics, while a man’s stereotypically masculine behavior was attributed to his innate masculine disposition. Thus, a male who gets into a fight is apt to be described as simply *aggressive*, whereas the same behavior from a female is likely to elicit more situation-specific descriptions (e.g., she struck the other person with her hand). These results imply that the language one uses to describe someone or someone’s behavior can easily lead to stereotype perpetuation between individuals (Wigboldus et al., 2000).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the connection between differential language use and gender-based prejudice is not limited to the traditional gender binary. Prejudice has been linked to biased language use regarding several disenfranchised groups, including lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. Research exploring prejudice toward sexual minorities has found that negative attitudes predict discriminatory language use. Multiple studies have shown that homophobic language use is associated with sexual prejudice, such that individuals who use more homophobic language also hold more negative attitudes toward LGB individuals (Chonody, Rutledge, & Smith, 2012; Hall & LaFrance, 2007; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). These findings provide evidence that attitudes toward a marginalized group can predict biased language use.

## Gender-Inclusive Language

Multiple studies have shown a consistent connection between sexism and attitudes toward unbiased, gender-inclusive language. One assessment of the link between gender and attitudes toward sexist language found that attitudes toward women partially mediated the connection between gender and attitudes toward sexist language. Individuals with more negative attitudes toward women were more accepting of sexist language (Parks & Robertson, 2004). Another study showed that both modern and hostile sexism were associated with negative attitudes toward gender-inclusive language, such that more sexism predicted more negative attitudes (Sarrasin et al., 2012). Related work suggests a connection between sexism and inclusive language use. A study using

university students found that participants who had more egalitarian attitudes toward women were also more likely to use nonsexist language (Jacobson & Insko, 1985). More recent work by Swim, Mallett, and Stangor (2004) also found that men who are high in sexism do not perceive gender-biased (e.g., male-centric) language to be sexist; are more likely to use gender-biased, sexist language; and are less likely to use gender-inclusive, unbiased language (Swim et al., 2004). Cralley and Ruscher (2005) also found that men who score lower on measures of modern sexism are more likely to use gender-inclusive terms in writing, whereas men higher on sexism use fewer gender-inclusive terms. Taken together, there is compelling evidence that sexist attitudes affect attitudes toward gender-inclusive language as well as actual gender-inclusive language use.

These findings lead to questions regarding the conscious processes by which individuals decide (or not) to use gender-inclusive language. Research has demonstrated a number of strategies used to indicate gender-inclusive language, including language neutralization and language feminization. Language neutralization refers to the replacement of masculine forms of specific words (e.g., he, policeman, and mailman) with gender-neutral words (e.g., they, police officer, and mailperson; Harris, Bienkove, & Telem, 2017). Language feminization, a far more controversial approach, refers to the use of feminine qualifiers paired with a traditionally male noun (e.g., he or she woman professor, female mechanic; Harris et al., 2017), with the aim of increasing the pairing of women with traditional male roles. This approach has been contentious, however, as it may reinforce traditional ideals that a woman in a traditionally male-dominated position is an outlier. It also reinforces the gender binary.

Overall, research ultimately indicates that, despite the strategy used, gender-inclusive language use is driven by effortful action, such that individuals are initially purposeful in their use of gender-inclusive language. Recent findings demonstrate that presenting individuals with arguments for gender-inclusive language leads to increases in gender-inclusive language use (Koeser & Sczesny, 2014). After being presented with arguments for gender-inclusive language, individuals changed their language on fill-in-the-blank texts to reflect gender-inclusive options. Such outcomes suggest that gender-inclusive language use might be initially based on conscious processing and purposeful choice.

Further study explored whether individuals increased their use of gender-inclusive language after reading text that included gender-inclusive words (e.g., gender-neutral pronouns). Results showed that women, after reading text with gender-inclusive wording, increased their use of gender-inclusive language; men who read gender-inclusive text, on the other hand, increased their use of gender-inclusive language only after the gender-inclusive words were brought to their attention (Koeser et al., 2015). These findings broadly indicate that (a) individuals are more likely to use gender-inclusive language when their attention is drawn to it in some way and that (b) gender-inclusive language use is an effortful process. That is, individuals consider reasons for gender-inclusive language and are able to change behavior accordingly. It is only after gender-inclusive language is used deliberately for a period of time that it becomes habitual (Sczesny, Moser, & Wood, 2015).

## Gaps in the Gender-Inclusive Language Literature

Based on the existing body of literature, two things become apparent. First, although the extant research points to the power of language as a driving force of acceptance and equality, most existing literature has focused on the traditional woman/man binary (e.g., Prewitt-Freilino et al., 2012; Wasserman & Wesley, 2009). TGNC individuals have been largely left out of this discussion on gender and language. Although many TGNC individuals will choose to use pronouns that fit within the gender binary (he or she), many will choose plural pronouns (they) or pronouns that are not within that binary (xe/ze). TGNC individuals are effectively erased in systems that use masculine generics. The same power dynamics that allow gendered language to perpetuate a sexist status quo also promote cissexist circumstances by conveying assumptions of cisgender-as-normative. The extant literature on gender and language renders a large segment of our population invisible; thus, it is important to explore gender-inclusive language as it pertains to all individuals, regardless of gender identity. Using the current literature on sexism and gender-inclusive language (e.g., Jacobson & Insko, 1985; Parks & Robertson, 2004; Sarrasin et al., 2012), we aim to connect attitudes toward transgender individuals (ATTI; cissexism) to ideas about gender-inclusive language use.

Second, recent research points to the importance of awareness and deliberate action in using gender-inclusive language (e.g., Koeser et al., 2015; Koeser & Sczesny, 2014). By assessing individuals' awareness of and ideas about gender-inclusive language, we may be able to better comprehend why some people do not use gender-inclusive language. Moreover, we can connect perceptions of gender-inclusive language use to cissexism, which would allow us to further examine ways to call gender-inclusive language use to people's attention and potentially diminish cissexist attitudes. The current study examines individuals' responses to potential barriers to gender-inclusive language use as a way to better understand how perceptions of these barriers is related to attitudes toward TGNC individuals.

Limited research has examined gender-inclusive language use as it pertains to attitudes about TGNC individuals. Moreover, because recent research suggests that gender-inclusive language use is (initially) deliberate, better understanding how individuals' think about gender-inclusive language use may be helpful in increasing gender-inclusive language usage. Increasing gender-inclusive language, particularly in societies with gendered language, might help to reduce discrimination and foster gender equity. In the current study, we used two undergraduate convenience samples to explore how college students think about gender-inclusive language use. Furthermore, we aimed to connect those perceptions to attitudes toward TGNC individuals. Based on previous findings that show sexism is related to language use and attitudes toward gender-inclusive language, we expect that individuals' perceptions of gender-inclusive language use will be related to their attitudes toward TGNC individuals. Since limited research has been conducted on gender-inclusive language and TGNC individuals, this work is exploratory in nature. Our research questions are as follows:

**Research Question 1:** How do college students perceive gender-inclusive language use?

**Research Question 2:** How do college students' ideas about gender-inclusive language use relate to their attitudes toward TGNC individuals?

## Method

The measures used in this work were part of larger studies dealing with gender-inclusive language use to describe TGNC individuals. Two samples of undergraduate students were collected from the same large, rural, Southern university: the first sample was collected in Fall of 2015 and the second sample was collected in Spring of 2016. Undergraduate samples were collected for a couple of reasons. First, undergraduate students on college campuses may have more exposure to a multitude of viewpoints on social justice issues, including TGNC issues. College students may also be exposed to TGNC-positive occurrences, such as programming, social events, and gender-neutral restrooms. Moreover, college students have been the samples of interest for much research on TGNC, including the development of measures assessing ATTI; for example, the Attitudes toward Transgender Men and Women scale (Billard, 2018) and the measure used in this study, the ATTI Scale (Walch, Ngamake, Francisco, Stitt, & Shingler, 2012).

In order to overcome the potential low statistical power associated with each individual sample, as well as to replicate and confirm our findings, data from the two samples were then combined to run a mini meta-analysis (see Braver, Thoemmes, & Rosenthal, 2014; Goh, Hall, & Rosenthal, 2016).

### Participants: Study 1

Study 1 consisted of 317 undergraduate students. Nine individuals were removed due to an unfeasible response pattern (e.g., responding with the same number for all items) or incomplete data, leaving 308 individuals in the final sample. The mean age for the sample was 18.75 years ( $SD = 1.25$ ). The sample was 66% women and 31% men. Roughly 2% identified their gender as something besides woman or man, or preferred to not answer the question. The other 1% was missing data. The sample was predominantly White (71%). The remaining participants identified as Black (22%), Hispanic/Latino (<2%), Asian (<2%), Native American (1%), or Not listed (2%). An overwhelming majority of participants considered themselves Christian, with 62.9% being Protestant and 10.2% being Catholic. Participants were also asked to self-report their levels of political conservatism. About 14.3% reported being very conservative, 28% reported that they were moderately conservative, 12% reported being slightly conservative, and 19% reported being neither conservative nor liberal.

### Participants: Study 2

Study 2 consisted of 191 undergraduate students. Five individuals were removed for an unlikely pattern of responding or incomplete data, leaving 186 individuals in the



final sample. The mean age for the sample was 20.12 years ( $SD = 2.24$ ). The sample was 68% women and 29% men. The remaining 3% identified with a gender besides woman or man, or preferred to not answer the question. The sample was predominantly White (70%), with the remaining individuals identifying as Black (20%), Asian (4%), Hispanic or Latino (2%), and something other than the options given (3%). Indeed, 1% of data was missing. Similar to Study 1, an overwhelming majority of participants considered themselves Christian, with 61% being Protestant and 10% being Catholic. Participants were also asked to self-report their levels of political conservatism. In this sample, 12% reported being very conservative, 21% reported being moderately conservative, 13% reported being slightly conservative, and about 23% reported that they were neither conservative nor liberal.

## Materials

The same materials, written in English, were used in Study 1 and Study 2 and included the following:

**Definitions.** Participants were provided with definitions of “cisgender,” “transgender,” “transgender man,” and “transgender woman” prior to completing items on this survey. The definitions read as follows:

- Cisgender: Person whose gender identity (sense of oneself as a man or a woman) conforms with conventional expectations for their physical sex.
- Transgender: Person whose gender identity (sense of oneself as a man or a woman) differs from conventional expectations for their physical sex.
- Transgender man: Person who was assigned female at birth but identifies and lives as a man.
- Transgender woman: Person who was assigned male at birth but identifies and lives as a woman.

**Acquaintance With Someone Who Identifies as TGNC.** Participants were asked one question that read, “Do you personally know anyone whose gender identity is outside of the traditional binary (e.g., transgender)?” Response options included “Yes,” “No,” or “I don’t know.” This item was included in our initial correlations, as acquaintance with someone who identifies as TGNC has been shown to affect attitudes toward TGNC individuals (Norton & Herek, 2013; Woodford et al., 2012). This item significantly correlated with attitudes toward TGNC individuals in both samples and was included as a control variable in the final analyses.

**Frequency of Gender-Inclusive Language Use in Everyday Life.** Participants were asked one question that read, “How often would you say that you use gender-inclusive language in your everyday life?” Response options included Never, Almost Never, Sometimes, Almost Always, and Always. Because perceptions of gender-inclusive language use are likely related to actual gender-inclusive language use, this item was included into our analyses as a control variable.

*Political Ideology.* One item was included that assessed self-reported political ideology, reading “How would you rate yourself on the following scale?” Response options ranged from 1 (*as conservative as it gets*) to 9 (*as liberal as it gets*). Political ideology was included in our analyses because previous research (e.g., Norton & Herek, 2013) has found that political beliefs are related to ATTI, our outcome variable.

*Attitudes Toward Individuals Who Identify as Transgender.* The ATTI Scale (Walch et al., 2012) consists of 20 items, each using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward TGNC individuals. An example item is, “I would feel comfortable working closely with a transgendered individual.” For Study 1 and Study 2, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .97.

*Perceptions of Barriers to Using Gender-Inclusive Language.* Five researcher-designed items assessed five separate perceptions of gender-inclusive language use. The items were created based on dialogues with undergraduates surrounding diversity and inclusivity concerns. The dialogues were conducted by an undergraduate representative who was involved with several campus diversity initiatives. Items reflected common barriers students reported experiencing or would expect to experience when using gender-inclusive language. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with each barrier on a scale from  $-4$  (*very strongly disagree*) to 4 (*very strongly agree*). For Study 1, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .81; and for Study 2, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .80. Barriers included the following:

1. Gender-inclusive language is difficult for me to use.
2. Gender-inclusive language impairs my writing and speaking.
3. I find it difficult to use gender-inclusive language under time pressure.
4. It would be easier for me to use gender-inclusive language if there were easy rules about when or how to use it.
5. Those close to me generally do not use gender-inclusive language.

It should be noted that, on initial examination, the correlations between the first, second, and third perceptions were quite high (see Table 1). This indicates a lack of independence among these items, meaning they might be assessing similar constructs. Thus, these three items were combined to create a total score and are referred to as “Difficulty of Use” perceptions for the remainder of this article. The last two perceptions were not as highly correlated and were therefore left separate from the first three items. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the score of the Difficulty of Use items were .86 for Study 1 and .90 for Study 2.

## Procedure

Participants in Study 1 and Study 2 went through the same procedure. After approval from the university’s institutional review board, participants were recruited via SONA

**Table 1.** Correlations for Study 1.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Perception 1	—	.641***	.693***	.248***	.465***	.036	-.280***	-.261***	-.328***
2 Perception 2		—	.693***	.250***	.383***	-.002	-.208***	-.259***	-.348***
3 Perception 3			—	.357***	.443***	-.008	-.194***	-.210***	-.305***
4 Perception 4				—	.355***	-.076	.050	.012	.100*
5 Perception 5					—	-.043	-.294***	-.078	-.115*
6 Acquaintance with TGNC individual						—	-.125**	-.129**	-.178***
7 Gender-inclusive language use							—	.304***	.382***
8 Political ideology								—	.651***
9 Attitudes toward TGNC individuals									—

Note. TGNC = transgender and gender nonconforming.

Systems, an online research website set up through the university’s department of psychology. Participants were able to read through a list of options and choose this study. For their participation, students earned .5 research credits in a psychology course. The study was conducted online via the survey website Qualtrics. After indicating their consent to participate, participants read the definitions of “transgender” and “cisgender,” as well as a series of questions regarding gender-inclusive language describing TGNC individuals. Then, participants completed the items included in this work, which defined “gender-inclusive language use” and included political ideology, the ATTI, and the items assessing perceptions of barriers to gender-inclusive language use. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed and granted their credit automatically.

**Results**

In order to establish that attitudes toward TGNC individuals are related to how participants view barriers to gender-inclusive language use, we first ran our analyses in the two samples separately. Data from each study was subjected to a series of hierarchical linear regressions, with ATTI serving as the predictor variable and each of the perceived barriers serving as the outcome.

*Correlations*

Correlations were conducted for both samples to demonstrate adequate relationships among the variables and can be found in Table 1 (Study 1) and Table 2 (Study 2).

As previously noted, very high correlations were found among Perceptions 1, 2, and 3 in both samples; thus, these items were combined to account for interdependence and

**Table 2.** Correlations for Study 2.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Perception 1	—	.730***	.761***	.203***	.393***	.097	-.354***	-.223***	-.400***
2 Perception 2		—	.747***	.225***	.331***	.118	-.277***	-.252***	-.428***
3 Perception 3			—	.361***	.365***	.107	-.281***	-.212***	-.301***
4 Perception 4				—	.183**	-.065	.025	.086	.141*
5 Perception 5					—	.007	-.334***	-.070	-.148*
6 Acquaintance with TGNC individual						—	-.149*	-.171***	.256***
7 Gender-inclusive language use							—	.195**	.288
8 Political ideology								—	.631***
9 Attitudes toward TGNC individuals									—

Note. TGNC = transgender and gender nonconforming.

multicollinearity. Acquaintance with someone who identifies as TGNC was significantly correlated with attitudes toward TGNC individuals in both samples. Political ideology and everyday gender-inclusive language use were significantly correlated with most perceptions, as well as attitudes toward TGNC individuals. Gender was examined but was not found to correlate with perceptions of gender-inclusive language; thus, gender was not included in our hierarchical regressions.

### Hierarchical Regressions

We then conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regressions. For each regression, attitudes toward TGNC individuals was the predictor variable, while one of the three perceptions served as the outcome variable. In addition, political ideology and actual language use were included as covariates. Previous research suggests that political ideology might impact attitudes toward individuals who identify as transgender and gender-inclusive language (Norton & Herek, 2013); ideology correlated with attitudes toward TGNC individuals, as well as most perceptions of barriers to gender-inclusive language in both current studies. Participants' reported gender-inclusive language use was also significantly correlated with each perceived barrier and attitudes toward TGNC individuals and was thus added as a control variable in the current analyses.

Results are first reported for each study separately and are then combined in a within-article meta-analysis (Braver et al., 2014; Goh et al., 2016) to describe the overall effects found across studies.

*Difficulty of Use (Combined Items 1, 2, and 3).* The Difficulty of Use total was composed of three single items: "Gender-inclusive language is difficult for me to use," "Gender-inclusive language impairs my writing and speaking," and "I find it difficult to use gender-inclusive language under time pressure."

**Table 3.** Linear Model of Predictors of Difficulty of Use Items for Study 1 and Study 2.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\Delta R^2$
<i>Study 1</i>					
Step 1					.132***
Political ideology	-.734	.147	-.250	-4.985***	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-1.043	.250	-.209	-4.173***	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.404	.459	-.043	-0.880	
Step 2					.039***
Political ideology	-.271	.181	-.092	-1.492	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-.768	.253	-.154	-3.032**	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.570	.451	-.060	-1.265	
ATTI	-.089	.021	-.270	-4.214***	
<i>Study 2</i>					
Step 1					.141***
Political ideology	-.619	.207	-.195	-4.986**	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-1.566	.368	-.275	-4.256***	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	.374	.690	.035	0.541	
Step 2					.076***
Political ideology	.054	.247	.017	0.220	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-1.245	.359	-.219	-3.467***	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.187	.672	-.018	-0.279	
ATTI	-.134	.029	-.370	-4.557***	

Note. ATTI = attitudes toward transgender individuals; TGNC = transgender and gender nonconforming; SE = standard error.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Linear models for Difficulty of Use for Study 1 and Study 2 can be found in Table 3. In Study 1, political ideology was significantly related to this first perception such that conservative individuals perceive more difficulty to inclusive language use due to this barrier,  $\beta = -.25, p < .001$ . Everyday gender-inclusive language use was also significantly related to this perception,  $\beta = -.21, p < .001$ . Acquaintance with someone who identifies as TGNC was not significantly related,  $\beta = -.04, p = .38$ . When attitudes toward TGNC was added into the model, political ideology was rendered nonsignificant,  $\beta = -.09, p = .14$ , while everyday gender-inclusive language use was still significant,  $\beta = -.15, p = .003$ . Acquaintance with someone who identified as TGNC was still nonsignificant,  $p = .21$ . Of primary interest, attitudes toward TGNC was significantly related to Difficulty of Use, such that more negative attitudes toward individuals who identify as transgender were associated with increased perceptions that gender-inclusive language is difficult to use,  $\beta = -.27, p < .001$ .

Study 2 replicated these findings, showing that (a) attitudes toward TGNC added to the predictive power of political ideology, everyday language use, and acquaintance and (b) more negative attitudes predicted increased perceptions that gender-inclusive language is hard to use,  $\beta = -.37, p < .001$ . These findings suggest that individuals'

**Table 4.** Linear Model of Predictors of Perception Item 4 for Study 1 and Study 2.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\Delta R^2$
<i>Study 1</i>					
Step 1					.006
Political ideology	-.021	.057	-.019	-0.364	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	.042	.097	.023	0.434	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.246	.178	-.071	-1.379	
Step 2					.015*
Political ideology	-.127	.072	-.119	-1.781	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-.021	.100	-.012	-0.212	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.205	.178	-.060	-1.154	
ATTI	.020	.008	.171	2.458*	
<i>Study 2</i>					
Step 1					.013
Political ideology	.096	.073	.92	1.318	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-.016	.130	-.08	-0.123	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.198	.243	-.056	-0.816	
Step 2					.007
Political ideology	.030	.091	.029	0.335	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-.048	.132	-.026	-0.363	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.143	.247	-.041	-0.580	
ATTI	.013	.011	.110	1.213	

Note. ATTI = attitudes toward transgender individuals; TGNC = transgender and gender nonconforming; SE = standard error.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

attitudes toward TGNC are linked to perceptions of gender-inclusive language as difficult to use.

**Perception Item 4.** The fourth perceived barrier to gender-inclusive language use was “It would be easier for me to use gender-inclusive language if there were easy rules about when or how to use it.” Linear models for Perception 4 for Study 1 and Study 2 can be found in Table 4. In Study 1, this perceived barrier was not significantly related to political ideology ( $\beta = -.02$ ,  $p = .72$ ), everyday gender-inclusive language use ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p = .67$ ), or acquaintance with a TGNC person ( $\beta = -.07$ ,  $p = .17$ ). When attitudes toward TGNC was added into the model, political ideology, everyday gender-inclusive language use, and acquaintance with a TGNC person remained nonsignificant, all  $ps > .05$ . Attitudes toward TGNC were significantly related to this perception, such that those who had more positive attitudes were more likely to agree that using gender-inclusive language would be easier if there were rules for use,  $\beta = .17$ ,  $p = .014$ .

In Study 2, however, results showed that political ideology, everyday gender-inclusive language use, and acquaintance with a TGNC person were all nonsignificant in

**Table 5.** Linear Model of Predictors of Perception Item 5 for Study 1 and 2.

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\Delta R^2$
<i>Study 1</i>					
Step 1					.101***
Political ideology	-.004	.058	-.063	0.949	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-.612	.098	-.317	-6.236***	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.300	.180	-.082	-1.667	
Step 2					.000
Political ideology	.004	.073	.004	0.058	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-.607	.102	-.315	-5.971***	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.303	.181	-.083	-1.674	
ATTI	-.002	.008	-.012	-0.179	
<i>Study 2</i>					
Step 1					.105***
Political ideology	.004	.073	.003	0.049	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-.652	.130	-.328	-4.997***	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.188	.243	-.051	-0.774	
Step 2					.008
Political ideology	.079	.091	.071	0.861	
Everyday gender-inclusive language use	-.616	.133	-.309	-4.633***	
Acquaintance with a TGNC person	-.251	.247	-.068	-1.018	
ATTI	-.015	.011	-.118	-1.376	

Note. ATTI = attitudes toward transgender individuals; TGNC = transgender and gender nonconforming; SE = standard error.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

both models, (*ps* > .05 for all). Also in contrast to Study 1, the relation between attitudes toward TGNC individuals and Perception 4 was found to be nonsignificant,  $\beta = .11, p = .23$ .

**Perception Item 5.** The fifth perception of gender-inclusive language use was “Those close to me generally do not use gender-inclusive language.” Linear models for Barrier 5 for Study 1 and Study 2 can be found in Table 5. In Study 1, political ideology ( $\beta = -.003, p = .94$ ) and acquaintanceship ( $\beta = -.08, p = .10$ ) were not significantly related to this perception; however, everyday gender-inclusive language use was,  $\beta = -.32, p < .001$ . When attitudes toward TGNC was added into the model, political ideology remained nonsignificant, *p* = .95, as did acquaintance with someone who is TGNC, *p* = .10. Attitudes toward TGNC were also not significantly related to this perception,  $\beta = -.01, p = .86$ .

In Study 2, political ideology was not significantly related to perceptions of close others’ gender-inclusive language use, *p* = .96, and remained nonsignificant when attitudes toward TGNC was added, *p* = .39. The same was true for acquaintance with someone who is TGNC (*p* = .44 in the first model and *p* = .39 in the second model).

Everyday gender-inclusive language use was significantly related to this perceived barrier in both Model 1 ( $\beta = -.33, p < .001$ ) and Model 2 ( $\beta = -.31, p < .001$ ). As in Study 1, attitudes toward TGNC were not significantly related to Perception 5,  $\beta = -.12, p = .17$ .

### Mini Meta-Analysis

A mini meta-analysis was conducted to test the relationships between ATTI and each separate perception of barriers to gender-inclusive language use across both studies, using the fixed-effects guidelines delineated by Goh et al. (2016). In this case, the mean effect size was determined by mean correlations, which were weighted by sample size, transformed using Fisher's  $z$ , and converted back to Pearson correlations for presentation. Examination of the mean effect sizes across the two studies revealed that ATTI was significantly related to all three perceptions. The combined Difficulty of Use perceptions showed the strongest effect ( $Mr = -.392, z = -10.284, p < .001$ ), followed by Perception 5 ( $Mr = -.125, combined z = -3.072, p < .01$ ), and Perception 4 ( $Mr = .112, z = 2.752, p < .05$ ). These results suggest that even though ATTI was not consistently, significantly related to Perception 4 ("It would be easier for me to use gender-inclusive language if there were easy rules about when or how to use it") and Perception 5 ("Those close to me generally do not use gender-inclusive language"), the mean effect sizes between the two studies indicate that ATTI had an effect on both perceptions.

### Discussion

The current work explored college students' perceptions of gender-inclusive language as it pertains to TGNC individuals. Although previous work has explored gender-inclusive language use and its relation to attitudes, such research has solely focused on the gender binary of woman or man. As TGNC individuals identify in a broad range of ways (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Gagne et al., 1997; Morgan & Stevens, 2008), it is necessary to explore gender-inclusive language as it pertains to all individuals, not just those who fit into the socially prominent gender dichotomy. Previous research demonstrates that a part of TGNC identity formation involves a social identity, including the use of adopted pronouns (Bilodeau, 2005; Kozee et al., 2012). Therefore, it's necessary to better understand factors that are related to pronoun use. These two studies assessed perceived barriers to gender-inclusive language use and their connections to attitudes toward TGNC individuals.

Results from Study 1 yielded that several of the perceived barriers to using gender-inclusive language were significantly related to attitudes toward individuals identifying as transgender. Generally, participants who had more negative attitudes toward TGNC more strongly endorsed perceptions that gender-inclusive language use is difficult to use, that it would be easier to use if there were set rules, and that family and that close others do not use gender-inclusive language. Study 2 partially confirmed these results, with one of the three perceived barriers significantly related to attitudes



toward TGNC individuals. Difficulty of use items were significantly, negatively related to attitudes toward those who identify as TGNC, such that greater endorsement of this perception was linked to more negative attitudes.

Results also showed that self-reported gender-inclusive language use was connected to perceptions, which is a reasonable connection to expect; individuals who report less gender-inclusive language use may perceive it as more difficult to use and vice versa. Interestingly, our results did not show that participant gender had any impact on our findings. This is surprising given that differences have been found between men and women on gender-inclusive language use. However, most individuals in the sample reported lack of gender-inclusive language use, as well as difficulty in using gender-inclusive language, suggesting that gender-inclusive language use is tricky for all, regardless of gender.

To account for potential issues with statistical power, a mini meta-analysis of each barrier in both studies was conducted and showed that the mean effect sizes of ATTI on each of the perceptions was significant; that is, attitudes toward TGNC individuals were related to the Difficulty of Use perceptions, Perception 4, and Perception 5 across both studies. These findings demonstrate a connection despite inconsistent patterns of results regarding Perceptions 4 and 5 in terms of their relation to ATTI. This suggests that individuals' level of cissexism is connected to their perceptions of the ease of using gender-inclusive language and perceptions of close friends and families' gender-inclusive language use.

Participants' perceptions of gender-inclusive language use as difficult is not surprising, considering a large percentage of individuals in this study reported that they do not use gender-inclusive language in everyday life. Thus, it seems that even students who do not perceive many barriers to use and hold positive attitudes toward TGNC are unlikely to use gender-inclusive language in their everyday life. This knowledge helps put the inconsistent findings for the fourth item in perspective; this item asked respondents if gender-inclusive language would be easier to use if there were rules for how to use it. It could be that, regardless of attitudes, individuals feel that gender-inclusive language is difficult to use because there are no grammatical rules evident about how to use such language.

Beyond not having specific rules to guide gender-inclusive language use, the lack of regular gender-inclusive language use may occur for a number of reasons. First, this study was conducted in a society that uses gendered language and masculine generics. It is possible that students do not identify this way of communicating as being exclusionary. If so, it may not be that they do not want to use gender-inclusive language; they simply do not have knowledge to do so. Furthermore, this study was conducted at a university in the rural South. Because this is an isolated and conservative area, it is possible that students have never had interactions with individuals who openly identify as TGNC. Again, it is possible that it does not occur to students to use inclusive language; they just simply do not have the experience or language to do so.

Taken together, these results suggest that individuals' perceptions of barriers to gender-inclusive language use are connected to their attitudes toward TGNC. Specifically, the findings imply that individuals who hold negative attitudes will more

strongly agree that they experience barriers to gender-inclusive language use. These results are similar to previous research on language and sexism, which show that individuals who hold more prejudicial attitudes also dislike use of gender-inclusive language (e.g., Parks & Robertson, 2004; Swim et al., 2004). However, this work extends previous findings to show how perceptions of gender-inclusive language use are associated with attitudes toward individuals who identify as TGNC. These results are important, as they are the first to link perceptions of gender-inclusive language use to attitudes toward TGNC. Although actual language use (e.g., daily speech was not assessed in this study, our findings provide preliminary research linking language and prejudicial attitudes.

### *Limitations*

Some limitations should be accounted for when considering our results. First, our items did not specifically reference transgender or gender nonconforming individuals. Participants had previously viewed definitions of “transgender” and had completed a series of questions about using gender-inclusive language to describe individuals who identify as transgender. However, neither the directions for the perception items nor the items themselves mentioned that participants should be thinking of gender-inclusive language use outside the traditional gender binary. Thus, it is possible that participants were not considering individuals who identify outside the binary when responding to items about language use. It is likely that individuals may have less difficulty using gender-inclusive language and correct pronouns when referring to transgender individuals whose identities fit within the gender binary (e.g., transgender man and transgender woman); in contrast, individuals may have more difficulty using appropriate, inclusive language to refer to individuals whose identities are not within the binary (e.g., genderqueer and agender) and who use unconventional pronouns like they/them or xi/xir. It is reasonable to suggest that such unconventional terms may produce greater resistance to inclusive language use. If this is the case, then our results may not accurately reflect individuals’ perceptions of barriers to gender-inclusive language use. Future study should explicitly reference individuals who identify as transgender or nonbinary in items.

Second, gender-inclusive language was not defined for participants. Therefore, it is possible that individuals were not aware of what this term means, and how gender-inclusive language is enacted. Furthermore, it was unclear whether the items were referring to spoken language, written language, or both. Beyond the obvious distinction in terms of medium of communication, there are differences between written and spoken language. As individuals generally have more time to think while writing, it is possible that they may be better able to think through their word choice, compared with spoken language, which generally happens more quickly and directly to someone else. Thus, individuals may use different words in their writing versus their oral speech. As we will elaborate on in the next section, this might also account for discrepancies between rates of gender-inclusive language use in everyday life.

Furthermore, this study did not assess the inclusivity of participants' actual language in describing TGNC individuals; that is, we did not assess how inclusive their everyday speech or writing is, and only received a self-report of their own perceived use. Previous research has connected attitudes to actual gender-inclusive language use; for example, a body of work shows that sexism is related to gender-inclusive language use, such that those higher in sexism are less likely to use inclusive language (e.g., Cralley & Ruscher, 2005). However, the current work only yields a connection between perceptions of barriers to gender-inclusive language use and ATTI. Thus, there is no way to say, based on our findings, that attitudes are related to actual nonbiased language use. In the future, research should focus on the connection between attitudes toward individuals identifying as TGNC and actual language use. Furthermore, research could focus on other mechanisms behind biased language use, which could be useful in encouraging people to use gender-inclusive language.

Although we assessed individuals' self-reported political ideology, we did not use a validated political ideology measure. Instead, we assessed individuals' political ideology using one item, having respondents rate their perceived ideology on a measure from 1 (*as conservative as it gets*) to 9 (*as liberal as it gets*). Such a measure has been used by a number of researchers, including the Pew Research Center. However, there may be differences between self-reported ideology and actual political beliefs, particularly social values regarding LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) individuals; that is, it is possible that someone may consider themselves a conservative, but have liberal ideas related to LGBTQ rights. Thus, future research should incorporate more nuanced, validated measures of political ideology.

Last, both studies used convenience samples of college students in the rural South. This poses a number of potential issues. First, college-aged students may be more liberal than older adults (e.g., Cornelis et al., 2009). Therefore, they may have more awareness of TGNC issues; some research suggests that college-aged individuals and young adults have more positive feelings toward individuals who identify as TGNC compared with older adults (Norton & Herek, 2013). Therefore, attitudes may be more positive in this sample than they would in a more representative sample. However, individuals in the rural South tend to be more traditional and conservative than those of individuals in other areas of the country (Gallup, 2015). As a result, participants likely had relatively more traditional gender ideals, less exposure to transgender issues, and less knowledge of inclusive language use than might otherwise be expected in a college sample. Thus, these results may differ in other areas of the country where attitudes are more liberal and less traditional.

## **Implications**

The current studies are a crucial first step in establishing a link between attitudes toward individuals identifying as transgender and perceptions of gender-inclusive language use. Our findings have a number of implications for future research and practical application. First, these findings necessitate a deeper understanding of the link between prejudice and language. Although numerous findings have connected

prejudice to biased language use (e.g., Parks & Roberton, 2004; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Swim et al., 2004), there is little understanding of the mechanisms that connect the two. Furthermore, it is unclear if prejudice begets biased language, biased language begets prejudice, or if there are other processes in play. By understanding the means by which prejudice and biased language are related, researchers can take steps to change both. Ultimately, by promoting gender-inclusive language use, we may hope to foster more positive attitudes toward TGNC individuals.

These findings also indicate, as previous findings show, that deliberate, explicit processes (Sczesny et al., 2015) are driving gender-inclusive language use as it pertains to those who identify as TGNC. Participants readily admitted that they did not use gender-inclusive language use on a daily basis. These seemingly contradictory results suggest that, when putting effort into using correct pronouns for TGNC individuals, participants are able to use the desired language for describing TGNC people. However, in day-to-day activities, individuals are not consciously putting effort into using correct, inclusive, affirming language. This may also have implications for written versus spoken language, as previously mentioned. When writing, participants have more time to think about the language they are using compared with when speaking. This suggests that the processes by which language evolves to be more gender-inclusive and TGNC affirming may be different for written versus spoken language. In the future, more research should focus on effortful language use, as well as written versus spoken gender-inclusive language use, to better understand how these processes influence gender-inclusive language use.

Furthermore, better understanding individuals' perceptions of inclusive language use can drive interventions that aim to promote gender-inclusive language use. Some research has already shown that gender-inclusive language use can be increased (Koeser & Sczesny, 2014). In this study, participants were presented with four statements: strong or weak arguments that were for or against gender-inclusive language (as it pertains to the traditional gender binary). Results showed that arguments promoting gender-inclusive language lead to increased gender-inclusive language use. However, these results do not show that gender-inclusive language use changed over time. Future work could focus on how dispelling perceptions of barriers to gender-inclusive language use might help promote greater inclusivity. By exploring the mechanisms behind barriers to use, we can create a more sophisticated picture of gender-inclusive language use and can thereby design more effective, long-lasting interventions.

## **Conclusions**

Two studies examined individuals' perceptions of barriers to gender-inclusive language use and how such perceptions related to attitudes toward individuals who identify as TGNC. Findings indicated that perceived barriers were related to attitudes. Individuals who had more negative ATTI were more likely to perceive gender-inclusive language use as more difficult, disagree that gender-inclusive language would be easier to use if there were rules, and disagree that people close to them use inclusive

language. While these findings are similar to a host of previous research linking attitudes and gender-inclusive language use, previous work has only explored gender-inclusive language use with regard to the woman/man dichotomy. The current findings expand on this by exploring gender-inclusive language use as it pertains to individuals who do not fit in the traditional gender binary. These findings are among the first known to link attitudes toward individuals who identify as transgender and perceptions of barriers to gender-inclusive language use. They also lay the foundation for future studies and interventions to increase gender-inclusive language. Increasing gender-inclusive language use may be related to improved ATTI, which would ultimately create more positive outcomes for those who identify as TGNC.

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