Action Potential #4
Inclusive Language

ACTION POTENTIALS

How we use language can reinforce or counteract stereotypes about who is best suited to a field. Research shows that using masculine forms for mixed-gender groups (e.g. the German masculine "Wissenschaftler" to refer to all scientists) evokes a male bias in mental representations.[1] This mental bias influences, e.g. perceptions of women and non-binary individuals belonging in a field, their responsiveness to job ads, likelihood of their being suggested as candidates for positions, and evaluations. Thus, using gender-inclusive language can help reduce stereotyping and discrimination.[1]

Further, we can support greater inclusion of LGBTQ+ colleagues, e.g. by using people's correct pronouns[2] (he/she/they or neo-pronouns) and symbols acknowledging a non-binary spectrum of gender identities (e.g. women*, Wissenschaftler*innen, Wissenschaftler:innen, etc.). Moreover, the symbol *, while not completely barrier-free, is currently the most accepted gender-inclusive symbol among people who use screenreaders, including those with disabilities.[3]

Below are some tools supporting use of inclusive language in German and English.

Selected resources:

Regelungen zur geschlechtergerechten Kommunikation an der Charité (Charité, German)

Geschlechtergerechte Sprache am Berlin Institute of Health (BIH, German)

United Nations Guidelines for gender-inclusive language in English

Transgender Glossary: Terms You Can Learn (Kathy Katella, Yale Medicine, 2022)

Gender-Neutral Pronouns 101: Everything You've Always Wanted to Know (Devin-Norelle, Them, 2022)

Recommended reading:

1. Sczesny, S., Formanowicz, M., Moser, F. Can Gender-Fair Language Reduce Gender Stereotyping and Discrimination? Front Psychol 7(25): 1-11 (2016)

2. LGBT+ Scientists give their views on their workplaces. Interviews by K. Powell, R. Terry and S. Chen. Nature 586: 813-816 (2020)

3. Koehler, S. und M. Wahl. Empfehlung zu gendergerechter, digital barrierefreier Sprache. Eine reprä-senative Studie der Überwachungsstelle des Bundes für Barrierefreiheit von Informationstechnik (2021)

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