

He/she, him/her -- a sign of women's place in society?

August 9 2012

Language use in books mirrors trends in gender equality over the generations in the US, according to a new study by Jean Twenge, from San Diego State University, and colleagues. Their work explores how the language in the full text of more than one million books reflects cultural change in U.S. women's status. The study is published online in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*.

Twenge and colleagues, W. Keith Campbell and Brittany Gentile of the University of Georgia, examined whether the use of gendered pronouns such as 'he' and 'she' mirrored women's status between 1900-2008, by examining books available through the Google Books ngram viewer.

Their analyses showed that the frequency of use of female versus male pronouns followed the ups and downs of women's status over time. More specifically, female pronouns were used progressively less often (compared to male pronouns) in the post-war era (1946-1967) when women's status declined or stagnated, and more often after 1968 when women's status rose considerably. In addition, US books used relatively more female pronouns when women were more educated, participated in the labor force more, and married later – all signs of increased status for women. US college women were also more assertive at times when relatively more female pronouns appeared in books.

"These trends in language quantify one of the largest, and most rapid, cultural changes ever observed: The incredible increase in women's [status](#) since the late 1960s in the U.S.," said Twenge. "Gender equality is

the clear upside of the cultural movement toward individualism in the U.S., and books reflect this movement toward equality. That's exciting because it shows how we can document social change."

More information: Twenge JM et al (2012). Male and female pronoun use in US books reflects women's status, 1900-2008. Sex Roles; [DOI 10.1007/s11199-012-0194-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-012-0194-7)

Provided by Springer

Citation: He/she, him/her -- a sign of women's place in society? (2012, August 9) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-08-heshe-himher-women-society.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.