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Editorial

Disability is Not a Dirty Word

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Editorial

There are many euphemisms for disability: handicapable; special needs; physically challenged; exceptional; differently abled; (dis)Able. We have a perfectly good word: Disabled.

Why is language so important? Is it just about being politically correct or 'woke'? I would argue that word usage and language serve many purposes. The first purpose is to signal validation: I hear you and your preferred words, and I respect your preferences (and hence your identity). Second, language both reflects and shapes ideas. For example, when we acknowledge the use of they/them pronouns, it opens ways for us to think about gender as more than the binary choice of male and female. Similarly, 'person with a disability' versus 'disabled person' forces us to consider how we describe people's identities. We don't say 'man who is gay' but 'gay man', so why not 'disabled person'? Third, language signals change. The move from 'colored' to 'negro' to 'African American' to Black mirrored important shifts in perceptions, identities, and civil rights.

The evolution of language about disability is instructive in how we frame chronic conditions and/or disability. For many years, up until about the 1980s, 'handicapped' was the term most used. For example, there was the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975, U.S. Congress, PL 94-142). By 1990, that Act was reauthorized and named the Individuals with *Disabilities* Education Act (IDEA; PL 101-476). The ADA (1990; PS 101-336) is the Americans with *Disabilities* Act. This *person-first language*

(e.g., person with a disability, person with cerebral palsy) was a move towards not reducing people to their disabilities but seeing them as whole persons for whom disability was only one part. Then, within the disability community, there was a reclamation of the term 'disabled,' much as other communities have reclaimed words that were once considered slurs (e.g., 'queer'). This is *identity-first language* (Dunn & Andrews, 2015) [1] in which disability is a key part of identity and not one that is disavowed. This puts disability as an identifier in the same way we might say Japanese or Brazilian or Nonbinary. Some specific disability communities have their own preferred language. For example, deaf with a small 'd' implies a hearing impairment, while Deaf with a capital 'D' means someone who is linguistically (sign language) and culturally part of the Deaf community. The term 'hard of hearing' is preferred to 'hearing impaired.' The autistic community has largely embraced neurodiversity and reclaimed 'autistic person' or 'an autistic' or 'neurodiverse' as part of their identity. (Note that neurodiversity is a broader term than autistic, encompassing, for example, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder and Learning Disabilities.)

Words are part of code switching (a term first coined by Haugen in 1954). Some words are used by insiders with other insiders, then different words are selected as one code switches. Those inside words have often been used as slurs by outsiders, but have been reclaimed to show identity within a community. For example, 'cripple' was once a commonly used term, but became viewed as offensive; 'crip' is now an insider term. Words

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and phrases to avoid can be as important as preferred words are to use. When disability terms are used to describe something wrong (blind justice), defective (a disabled truck blocked traffic), less than (even the fat people and humpbacks wouldn't date him), then the word itself takes on a negative valence. We need to unlatch 'disabled' from negative connotations. For example, professional journals have swapped the term 'masked review' for 'blind review'; blind people can review articles [2].

There are other terms that need rethinking. When people with a specific disability are referred to as *patients* it implies that they have only that one identity. When we describe romantic partners as *caregivers* of partners it connotes a one-way relationship of helper and helpee. *Wheelchair bound* suggests an unfortunate means of being stuck in a chair, rather than the greater mobility implied by 'wheelchair user.' Other usage that should disappear: 'suffers from' (a specific disability), 'invalid,' or mentioning someone's disability when it is completely irrelevant to the topic (see Olkin, 2017) [3].

As a disabled woman, I own my disability as much as I own my gender. It's okay to use the word to describe me.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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