



Centre for
Independent
Living CIC

Sticks and Stones: The Language of Disability



Aim of document:

- In this publication we take a look at the empowering language we at SPECTRUM use to talk about Disability and Disabled People, and why this is important.

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<https://spiritdisabilityplatform.wordpress.com/>

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In this publication we take a look at the language we at SPECTRUM use to talk about Disability and Disabled People¹, and why.

As the old saying goes, 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me'. While that might be good advice to help children to deal with playground bullies, it might not be quite so much help when dealing with the kind of negative, stereotypical and sometimes oppressive language that Disabled People often have to face. Society's misconceptions about Disabled People are constantly being reinforced by disabling terms like 'cripple' and 'handicapped' - even in the 21st Century. Their continued use contributes significantly to the negative self image of Disabled People and at the same time perpetuates discriminatory attitudes and practices among the general public.

So, words can in fact do a lot of harm and - if you happen to be on the receiving end - can often be just as damaging as the proverbial 'sticks and stones'.

Sometimes, well-meaning but seriously misguided terms intended to counter this kind of overtly discriminatory language can do just as much harm, albeit in more subtle ways. For example, euphemistic terms such as 'physically challenged' and 'differently abled' have crept into our everyday language as a result of people failing to understand the difference between Medical and Social Models of Disability. While, in many ways, they are just plain daft - and often provoke a knowing shake of the head - such terms are still discriminatory because they imply that the 'problem' of Disability is still, essentially, located with people with impairments themselves. This neatly sidesteps the real reasons for the barriers we face. Yes, we are sometimes challenged physically - 10 flights of steps for a wheelchair user does indeed cause a certain degree of difficulty, even if they had three Weetabix for breakfast!! But take away the steps or put in a ramp, and the 'challenge' magically disappears.

¹ By Disabled People we refer to people with any form of impairment who are *disabled* by society and the multiple barriers they face, including people with a physical, sensory, intellectual, psychological, emotional, age related or any other hidden impairment(s). We therefore include people with learning difficulties, Deaf People, Blind and visually impaired people, mental health system users and survivors, people living with chronic illness and Older People with age related impairments.





Language is never neutral

All language has meaning that goes beyond being purely descriptive. It shapes how we see each other, the value we place on different identities, and how we actually behave. So, any discussion about the language we use to talk about Disability cannot be undertaken from a politically neutral standpoint.

At SPECTRUM we have always been very clear that our position is based on the Social Model of Disability, which makes a clear distinction between impairment and disability:

Impairment vs Disability

IMPAIRMENT IS

The functional limitation within an individual caused by a physical, mental, intellectual or sensory condition which differs from accepted 'norms'

SOCIAL MODEL DEFINITION OF DISABILITY

The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by society which takes little or no account of people who have impairments, and thus excludes them from mainstream activity. Therefore, disability, like sexism and racism, is discrimination and social oppression

DISABLED PEOPLE

Are therefore those people with impairments who are disabled by society

These distinctions make a huge difference to the language we use. Stereotypical language based on a Medical Model of Disability reinforces a negative view of Disabled People while, at the same time, disguises the social and economic basis of the barriers we face:



"Over the years a large amount of terminology concerning disability has evolved which denies the social construction of disability and is now considered offensive by many people in the British Disabled People's civil rights movement. These terms have originated and been perpetuated by the likes of the medical, religious and welfare professions. Many are patriarchal in nature, evoking the notion that Disabled People need looking after. Others are based on false premises that have since been disproved.

The language that people use reflects what they think and can influence how they deal with situations. If they behave as if the problem is with the individual, they will take a different approach than if they regard the problem as being with the attitudes, systems and practices that create disabling barriers."

('The Language of Disability', by Laurence Clark and Stephen Marsh, 2002)

So, for example, subjective terms like 'afflicted', 'sufferer', 'housebound' etc reinforce a negative view of Disabled People as powerless 'victims' or objects of pity. Similarly, phrases such as 'the disabled', 'the blind', and 'the deaf' dehumanise Disabled People to the point that they become invisible as real individuals. In some cases language can make us disappear altogether. How often, for example, have you heard wheelchair users referred to as "a wheelchair". Images of autonomous robot wheelchairs getting on and off airplanes might be appropriate in a science fiction film, but as a way of describing real people it is extremely offensive!!

'Political correctness' gone mad?

A lot is said about '*Political Correctness*' which has become a phrase of ridicule for many people. However this stance trivialises an important principle – that the language we use to describe people, should be language that those it describes are comfortable with, avoiding terms that are offensive or inaccurate.

It's also important to keep in mind that offensive language is offensive for a reason; many of the various words and phrases that have been used to describe Disability have a long history and almost always carry negative connotations. Interestingly, many also deliberately seek to define people with impairments as being 'outsiders' and not fully part of society. So, the term 'idiot', for example, derives from the Greek 'idiotus'



meaning "a person who does not take part in public life." and 'cripple' has been traced back to the Medieval word 'kripple', which meant "to be without power" - which is quite insightful if you think about it!!

Dismissing concerns about such language as 'political correctness gone mad' is, at best, misguided and naive. The question is, in any case, a false one. The main issue is not whether or not this or that term is 'correct' - which can quickly become a quite tedious debate - but whether or not the meaning it conveys is one that reinforces a positive or negative perception of Disabled People. All language describing particular groups in society is political - it cannot be anything but. So, the important questions are about whose language should be respected and which political perspectives hold sway.

Disabled People and the disabling society

While negative language describing people with impairments goes back hundreds of years, the emergence of the Disability Movement and the Social Model of Disability in the 1970s and 80s saw language itself become a fundamental political tool in our struggle for civil rights and inclusion.

According to the Social Model of Disability, people have impairments, they do not have disabilities. Disability is caused by society's inability or unwillingness to meet the needs of people with impairments. As a result, the term 'Disabled People' was redefined to mean people with impairments who are disabled by socially constructed barriers and the word 'Disabled' before 'People' or 'Person' came to signify identification with a collective cultural identity. Writing Disabled People with a capital 'D' and 'P' also became commonplace as a way of emphasise the term's political significance.

More recently some groups have chosen to adopt 'people-first' or 'person-first' language as a way of describing disability that involves putting the word 'person' or 'people' before the word 'disability' - as in 'people with disabilities'. The thinking behind this is to promote the idea that disability is just a label and not the defining characteristic of the individual.

But that is not a view we share because, just as with euphemistic terms like 'physically challenged', it mixes up the Medical and Social Models of Disability and confuses disability with impairment. Most importantly, it implies that the effects of disability lie with the individual, rather than society. This effectively denies the political and collective meaning of the term 'Disabled People'.



Terms preferred to describe different groups of Disabled People

People with Learning Difficulties: Usually prefer the term 'People with Learning Difficulties', or maybe 'People with Learning Impairments' to the term 'People with Learning Disabilities'. People have impairments, disability is what happens when society fails to recognise and meet the needs of people who have learning difficulties/impairments.

Deaf People: People with milder hearing loss may label themselves as 'hard of hearing', or 'hearing impaired'. However, people who have no usable hearing are known as Deaf and consider that their culture and language is different to other people, and therefore when referring to the Deaf culture and political identity, 'Deaf' should be capitalised. As a collective identity, 'Deaf' can be used to describe people who are Deaf, or have other hearing impairments.

Blind People: People with impaired vision will usually prefer to be referred to as Visually Impaired People. However, people who have no usable vision are Blind and consider that their cultural and political identity is different to other people, and therefore 'Deaf' should be capitalised. As a collective identity, 'Blind' can be used to describe people who are Blind, or have other visual impairments.

People with Mental Health Impairments: People have mental health impairments, or conditions – they should not be referred to as having mental health problems. Many such people preferred to use the label 'Mental Health System Survivors' as a statement against the often debilitating and damaging treatments they have to endure.

Cancer Survivors: People who have had, or currently are being treated for cancer, will often refer to themselves as Cancer Survivors, as their cancer is usually in remission, rather than cured.

Reclaiming our language

The term 'Disabled People' has been adopted to define a collective identity for the Disability Movement in the UK. Particular groups of Disabled People have also sought to reclaim different words and phrases as a way of asserting their own political and/or cultural identity. People with physical impairments have, for example, sometimes adopted terms like "crips", while some Mental Health System Users and Survivors have adopted the term "mads". In these cases, language is being used to reclaim and subvert words that were previously seen as derogatory and to give them a positive meaning. They are also used to



express solidarity and collective pride in a shared identity in the same way, for example, that some members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities have reclaimed the term "queer".

However, such language is of course very context-dependent. While it may be okay for members of the group to use these 'reclaimed' terms, they usually still retain their original negative connotations in wider society. Once again, this underlines that the language of Disability can never be politically neutral and emphasises the importance of respecting the way that Disabled People choose to define their collective identity.

The wheels, they keep on turning

When discussing the language of Disability, it is important to keep in mind that language in general is constantly evolving, and, accordingly, the language of Disability is also evolving, so this is an ongoing debate.

At SPECTRUM we believe it is vitally important to resist any attempts - whether deliberate or unintended - to neutralise the political meaning of the language we use to talk about Disability. We do not want to take on the role of 'thought police' or try to force people to only say what we want them to say. But, it is important to try to educate people about why language matters and to raise awareness of the ways that words influence actions and relationships. Language does not just describe our position in society, it actually helps to define it.







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