A Note on Language and the Social Identity of Disabled People

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The following note reflects on the common terminology used by both disabled and nondisabled persons to identify or describe people with a wide variety of disabilities. No attempt has been made to quantify the frequency of usage of any terms. Rather, the focus is on the social meaning of this language.

The language of disability indicates that persons with disabilities are usually perceived exclusively in terms of their disabilities, that they are confined to a "handicapped role" in which they are seen primarily as recipients of medical treatment, and that this role also includes ascribed traits of helplessness, dependency, abnormality of appearance and mode of functioning, pervasive incapacitation of every aspect of personhood, and ultimately subhumanness. A second set of terms attempts to weaken prejudice by substituting euphemistic labels. Finally, a "politicized" language being formulated by persons with disabilities reflects a contemporary effort to escape the "handicapped role" and to create an alternative, self-defined social identity.

The most common terms used to identify persons with disabilities are "the handicapped," "the disabled," "the deaf," "the blind," "the mentally retarded," "the developmentally disabled." All of these adjectives used as abstract nouns contribute to the process of stigmatization by reinforcing the tendency to "see" persons with disabilities only in terms of those disabilities. These labels rivet attention on what is usually the most visible or apparent characteristic of the person. They obscure all other characteristics behind that one and swallow up the social identity of the individual within that restrictive category. Such terminological usages also illustrate another pattern typical of the linguistic reinforcement of
prejudice by lumping all of the members of the stigmatized group into a uniform category, robbing them of individuality.

A second group of terms might be described as "medical labels." Quite apart from medical contexts, for instance in newspaper articles profiling handicapped individuals, persons with disabilities are often identified as "patients," "cases," or as "sick with," "afflicted by," "suffering from," or "stricken with" one condition or another. Whatever the social situation, persons with disabilities are often viewed as primarily objects of medical treatment.

This lends support to the conclusion that there is for such persons an expected "handicapped role," a social role comparable to the "sick role" described by Talcott Parsons (1964: 436-447). In that role as in the "sick role," individuals are expected to surrender control of their lives to professionals to receive treatment. Persons playing the "sick role" are exempted from "normal" responsibilities and endeavors in order to pursue the goal of "cure." But what if the condition is "incurable?" What if it is permanent? Then, it would seem, the individual is trapped in a state of suspended animation socially, is perpetually a patient, is chronically viewed as helpless and dependent, in need of cure but incurable. The "medical" labels referred to here reflect precisely that perception of disabled persons and that prescribed social role for them.

Other frequently used terms also express perceptions of helplessness and dependency: "victim," "abnormal," "defective," "infirm," "invalid," "unsound," "maimed." A second modern meaning of the adjective "crippled" is "inferior." Wheelchair-users are typically described as "confined to a wheelchair" and "wheelchair-bound."

All of these terms contain implicitly a notion of social incapacitation extending beyond the physical limitations of the particular medical condition. A disability is seen as engulfing the person's social identity. Thus the common language used supports Erving Goffman's (1963) conclusions about the pervasively "spoiling" impact on identity of stigmatized traits and Beatrice Wright's (1960: 8) observations regarding the "spread" effect of prejudice against physical disability.

Terms referring to specific disabilities also often contain the assumption that the physical or sensory condition taints the whole person. Words describing the appearance of some physically disabled persons, for instance "misshapen" and "deformed," connote that the individual has lost some essential part of his or her humanity. Reviews of recent versions of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" and "The Elephant Man" referred to the title characters as "the monster" and "the creature." In the
theatrical play and motion picture, "Whose Life Is It, Anyway?" the sharp-tongued and sharp-witted central figure, a spinal cord-injured quadriplegic, is made to refer to himself as "a vegetable." Again the language applied to disabled persons corroborates Goffman’s principal assertion that fundamentally, stigma is the assumption that stigmatized persons are less human than the rest of us.

It should come as no surprise that this overwhelmingly stigmatizing language has evoked a reaction from persons with disabilities and their advocates. In the last generation, parents of handicapped children and professionals who work with handicapped people have propagated an array of substitutes for the old prejudicial terms. They offer terms like "special," "special needs," "atypical," "exceptional," "persons with exceptionalities." Although these euphemisms try to get around the effects of prejudicial labelling, they finally have the unintended effect of reinforcing the perception of the essential difference of disabled persons. They still put persons with disabilities in a category separate from "normal" people. Because these new labels are often formulated by professional groups charged with looking after the needs of disabled clients, this terminology also ends up reinforcing the notion that handicapped people are primarily objects of professional supervision and treatment.

If such euphemisms inadvertently reiterate the perception of disabled persons as a stigmatized minority, other euphemisms seem studiously to avoid confronting that social reality. School children with disabilities are placed in "special education" or are "mainstreamed"; they are not "segregated" or "integrated," although few are confined to special classes for medical reasons. Even the staunchest advocates of the rights and interests of handicapped Americans, many of them handicapped themselves, proclaim not the necessity of combatting "prejudice" but the need to overcome "attitudinal barriers."

Meanwhile, other disability civil rights activists are attempting to deal with the issue of prejudice more directly. One of the ways is again linguistic, an expressed need to give a name to prejudice against disabled persons. The terms "handicappism," "physicalism," and "normalism" have been proposed. Although the first is most frequently used, none has yet won wide acceptance.

Perhaps the most interesting and significant aspect of the language of disability is the continuing debate and discussion among persons with disabilities themselves regarding preferable terms of identification. This discussion reflects the development of a new social and political self-
consciousness among handicapped people that is expressing itself most emphatically in the disability civil rights and independent living movements. Even the idea of such movements and the terms designating them, as well as the concept and designation of a “disability community,” represents a major historical change. Since World War II, and with accelerating momentum during the last decade, disabled persons in the United States and other developed countries have begun to identify themselves not as victims of disease and disablement in need of and dependent on benevolent oversight, but rather as a minority group, stigmatized, discriminated against, segregated, and denied the opportunity to participate equally in society for reasons not inherent to their medical conditions. The effort to develop a new language of disability evidences this widespread struggle to fashion a new collective identity.

Much of the debate within the disability community has focused on the relative demerits of the terms “disabled” and “handicapped.” Arguments are frequently raised against rather than for these or alternative terms. One is said to be less objectionable than another. A common complaint is that no terms have yet been found that describe disability at least neutrally, if not positively. Some disability rights advocates call for terms of self-identification that enable disabled persons to express pride in themselves, not despite their disabilities, but precisely with and even because of their experience of disability.

Because of dissatisfaction with both “disabled” and “handicapped,” neologisms have been fashioned as alternatives: “able-disabled,” “handicapable,” “disABLEd,” “differently abled.” A number of wheelchair athletes have expressed a preference for “challenged” or “physically challenged.” These alternatives seek to overcome the image embedded in the common language of disability that such persons are pervasively abnormal and totally incapacitated in all aspects of life. They intend to change public perceptions in order to free disabled persons from the “handicapped role.” Both the advocacy and the criticism of these alternative terms share common elements: a refusal to accept a stigmatized social identity, an assertion of pride in oneself as fully human whatever one’s disability, and an effort to break out of a limiting and subordinate social role.

One of the ways in which social groups define their identities is the establishment of boundaries, differentiating themselves from outsiders. In the past, persons with disabilities have been distinguished by the nondisabled majority as deviants outside “normal” society. The terms discussed above represent the historic initial efforts of disabled persons
to define themselves as an in-group. This time, they are the ones drawing the boundaries. Another form of this demarcation is the creation of names for people without disabilities: TABs (from "temporary able bodied"), ABs ("able bodies"), normies, regulars, walkers. Although the last three terms suggest a degree of self-deprecation, all of these words to varying degrees contain a hard edge of pride in differentness due to disability. Pride and positive self-identification are also expressed in the replacement of "able bodied" with "nondisabled."

All of the terms noted here that identify or describe persons with disabilities either positively or negatively reflect their status as a stigmatized minority. The pejorative traditional language confines them to a limited social role of dependency, professional supervision, marginality as human beings. An alternative euphemistic terminology attempts unsuccessfully to undermine stigma, but actually reinforces prejudice and social subordination. An emerging language, being developed by handicapped persons themselves and particularly influenced by the disability civil rights movement, actively resists stigma and social subordination, seeks to create an opposing positive social identity, and, in some instances, affirms a minority group identity.

REFERENCES


