Words matter: Notes on inclusive language

McMaster SRS ARABAO Resources Subcommittee version

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This document is intended to provide an up-to-date resource on language about anti-racism, anti-bias, and anti-oppression for contributors to McMaster School of Rehabilitation Sciences. This guide is not an exhaustive list and is intended to serve as an introduction to large social issues. Preferred language can often differ based on the content and context of each situation and is likely to change over time. **Whenever possible, be guided by the preferences of those concerned and ask for spellings and preferred usage.**

Indigenous Peoples

- Use "Indigenous Peoples" [uppercase] and avoid using "Aboriginal" or "Native." Use/encourage "Peoples" (not "People"), acknowledging and respecting the diversity within Indigenous cultures and communities and not treating them as a though everyone is the same.
- Avoid the common possessive construction "Canada's Indigenous Peoples", which evokes a sense of paternalism and colonialism. Use "Indigenous Peoples in Canada" instead.
- Indigenous Peoples in Canada include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. When possible, try to use the most specific descriptor.
- Use "First Nation" or "community" instead of "reserve," unless the story is specifically about the tract of land allocated to a First Nation.
- Do not use "reservation" or "tribal affiliation," which are Americanisms.
- If deciding to include a land acknowledgement, please review trc.ca and McMaster guidelines for land acknowledgements to guide critical reflection about the impacts of colonialism and consider steps to action and reconciliation.

Age-related language

- Use "older" rather than "elderly", for example older adults, the older demographic, an older person.
- Give a person's age (e.g., 8, 38, 88) rather than using imprecise and potentially derogatory terms such as youngster, middle-aged, retiree, senior citizen, elderly.
- In general, avoid labelling people as young or old, unless directly relevant to your story.

Disability-inclusive language

- The use of person-first (vs. disability-first) language is preferable in most cases; however, in some cases an explanation of the rationale guiding your choice of language being used may be preferred. Think critically about the language you are using and your purpose.
  - Consider explaining your rationale for using "person-first language" or not (for example, "a person with a disability" vs "disabled person").
- Avoid:
  - "lame," "spaz," "handicapped,"
  - terms that assume everybody is able-bodied, such as "see," "look," or "hear," when you can use "refer to," "check," or "go to"
  - emotional or judgemental descriptions of disability, for example: "She uses a wheelchair" rather than "she is confined to a wheelchair"
  - categorizing persons with disabilities as either super-achievers or tragic figures; avoid language such as "superheroes," "suffering with," "afflicted by," etc.
  - homogenous categorization, such as "the disabled" or "the deaf".
- If the disability is not relevant to the context, it is not necessary to write about it.
- A person is not just their condition, disability, or health needs. Say "she needs a hoyer lift" rather than "she is a hoyer lift." Say "the person in bed three" rather than "the stroke in bed three."
- Be aware of sanism and anti-sanist language, such as describing neurotypical people as "normal"
  - Avoid language that stigmatizes mental illness, such as "crazy," "insane," "psycho," etc.
  - Avoid using specific mental illness diagnoses to describe personal quirks, such as "I'm so OCD"

Members of racialized communities

- Current best practice is "racialized person" or "racialized group" instead of "racial minority," "visible minority," etc. When possible, try to use the most specific descriptor.
- "Person of colour" is often used and generally acceptable, but consider the effects of homogenizing the experiences of distinct racialized identities.
    - o Racial categories are socially constructed and complex; individuals and groups are entitled to self-identify.
- "Black" with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Use as an adjective; never use as a noun, either singular or plural.
    - o Consider that not all Black people identify with African heritage (for example, Black people from Caribbean countries).
- African American Vernacular English (AAVE)/Ebonics
    - o AAVE is a specific dialect of English attributed to Black Americans (and Black Canadians) that involves linguistic constructions that are distinct from standard American English. The dialect has strong connections to racialized cultural upbringings, particularly in the southern states of America. AAVE is often stigmatized and has been systemically oppressed in educational settings based on differences in grammatical structure compared to standard English dialects.

Gender identity and sexual orientation

- A person's gender identity and/or sexual orientation should not be mentioned unless relevant to the story. If so, use the phrase "sexual orientation," not "sexual preference."
- 2SLGBTQIA+ refers to the community of people who identify with any gender identity or sexual orientation outside of cisgender and/or heterosexual.
    - o The acronym stands for Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual/pansexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and the 'plus sign' signifies any and all other identities not explicitly listed.
    - o Many variations of this acronym are commonly used (for example, LGBT, LGBTQ+, LGBTQIA, etc.). Consider your purposes for including or excluding some identifiers when using an abbreviation to represent this community.
- **Gender identity**
    - o A person may identify as a woman, man, both, neither, between, etc.
        - ▪ The term "womxn" can be used to avoid perceived sexism (of having the word "man" in "woman") and is explicitly inclusive of transgender and non-binary people.
    - o An individual's personal and internal sense of their gender may be cisgender, transgender, Two-Spirit, non-binary, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, gender fluid, etc.
        - ▪ Some identifiers (for example, non-binary and genderqueer) may have similar definitions, though there are distinctions that are important to those concerned. It is best practice to use the identifier preferred by the persons involved.
        - ▪ "Transgender person", "trans man", and "trans woman" are correct. "Transman", "transwoman", "transgendered", and "transvestite" are derogatory and/or outdated terms.
        - ▪ "Two-Spirit" (not "Two-Spirited") is specific to Indigenous communities and refers to people with non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations. Two-Spirit is defined and regarded differently from nation to nation.
        - ▪ Refer to hormonal or surgical treatments as "gender-affirming" procedures rather than "gender/sex reassignment."
- **Sexual orientation**
    - o Sexual orientation is a construct separate from gender identity
        - ▪ For example, a person, including a transgender person, might be straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, queer or questioning.
    - o A person may be straight/heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, questioning, etc.
    - o "Queer" is a term with a complex history. It has recently been reclaimed by many within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community from its historically derogatory meaning. Some use it as a general

descriptor ("the queer community") and/or as an individual identifier for non-cisgender/heterosexual people. This term has different meanings for different people and should only be used with/about those who are comfortable with reclaiming the word with a positive context.

- **Gender neutral language**
  - Use for example: "esteemed guests" or "everybody" instead of "ladies and gentlemen"; "children" instead of "boys and girls"
  - Alternatives to "manmade": artificial, constructed, manufactured, synthetic
  - "Folx" is an alternative spelling of the word "folks" that specifically refers to an inclusive community of 2SLGBTQIA+ people
- **Pronouns** (not "preferred pronouns"):
  - It is best practice to introduce your own pronouns and then ask for clarification from the other person with whom you are speaking, regardless of your perception of their gender.
  - Commonly used pronouns are she/her, he/him, and they/them, though other pronouns are valid, such as ze/hir, fae/faer, etc.
    - Use the person's gender-affirming pronoun in your text and make generous use of their name to achieve as much clarity as possible.
  - "They/them/their" is a gender neutral pronoun.
    - They/them can be used to describe a person of unknown gender or a person who does not identify as either male or female.
  - Where possible, reword your sentence to avoid the "his/her" gender binary.
  - When presenting a role-playing case scenario, use gender neutral language to describe a patient such as "person" and "they" instead of "man/woman" and "his/her"
    - For example, "You are assessing a client who injured their hand," instead of "his/her hand"
  - Avoid assuming titles such as Mr., Ms, Miss, Mx, Mrs.
    - Mx is a gender neutral title that may be used by people who identify outside the gender binary of man/woman.
  - Cisgender people listing their pronouns in their email signature and social media profiles helps to normalize pronoun sharing and reduce the stigma for transgender and non-binary people.

Intersectionality

- Various aspects of a person's identity, such as race, class, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability are subject to overlapping systems of discrimination and privilege.
- People who belong to more than one marginalized community often face greater oppression and social disadvantages than their peers in the dominant groups.
- For example, a Black gay man would face more discrimination and greater barriers to healthcare based on his race and sexual orientation than a white gay man in a similar situation.
- "Being a Black person automatically means you're subjected to white supremacy and racism. Being a woman means you're subjected to misogyny and sexism. Being a trans person means you're subjected to transphobia and misogyny. You put those all together as a Black trans woman walking through the world and you have to walk through all of the worst parts of all of those things." - Schuyler Bailar, transgender advocate and motivational speaker
- As healthcare providers, it is important to consider the impact of intersectionality on our clients' life and experiences and consider social factors in treatment plans.

Adapted from: Rowley A. Words Matter: McMaster University's Editorial Style Guide [Internet]. 2019 [cited 2020 Nov 23]. Available from: https://brand.mcmaster.ca/app/uploads/2019/04/writing-guidlines.pdf