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What's in a Name?  
Terms Used to Refer  
to People With Disabilities

Karen Finlon Dajani, Ph.D.  
Chatham College

Abstract

What is in a collective name? Plenty, according to minority rights groups who have worked throughout the twentieth century to identify themselves using descriptive, reflective and respectful labels. These labels have often been "replacement" terms for those created by people outside of the group in question.

How are persons with disabilities identified by the media? An examination of articles concerning persons with disabilities provided to the national media by The Disability News Service, Inc. is examined along with those provided by a more general news service, Associated Press (AP), to determine whether there is a difference in terms utilized. Implications of findings are discussed.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." As this adage implies, names do not matter and arguing over them is a waste of time and a distraction from more important matters. Moreover, as persuasive as arguments in favor of a change in names or terminology may be, to some they represent a diversion from more important matters. W.E.B. DuBois wrote a classic argument in favor of maintaining the word "Negro" in March 1928:

Do not make the all too common error of mistaking names for things. Names are only conventional signs for identifying things. Things are the reality that counts. If a thing is despised, either because of ignorance or because it is despicable, you will not alter matters by changing its name. . . . Moreover, you cannot change the name of a thing at will. Names are not merely matters of thought and reason; they are growths and habits." (Bennett, 1967, 379)

Yet others argue that names do matter. In the eyes of the contingent seeking to establish "Black" as the replacement term for Negro, DuBois starts out with the correct premise that names are objectively unimportant. But he draws the incorrect conclusion that names are unimportant to people. (Bennett, 1967, 380) Benjamin Lee Whorf, the linguistic scholar, contends that language tends to prestructure thinking and acting. The meaning of a word or expression is what it does, that is, the effect which it produces in its hearers. A name can determine the nature of the response given to it by virtue of the associations which its use conjures up. Keith Baird, identified as an Afro American expert in a 1967 *Ebony* article by Bennett, is quoted as saying that "The very act and fact of changing the designation will cause the individual to be redesignated, to be reconsidered, not only in terms of his past and his present, but hopefully in terms of his future. Designation has an important bearing on destiny." (Bennett, 1967, 382) In a 1946 essay George Orwell wrote: "But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better." (Orwell, 1946)

There is plenty in a name, according to minority rights groups who have worked throughout the twentieth century to identify themselves using descriptive, reflective and respectful labels. These labels often have been "replacement" terms for those created by people outside of the group in question. Some maintain that a change in name can short circuit the stereotyped thinking patterns that undergird the system of prejudice in America. (Bennett, 1967, 374) "For groups, as for individuals, taking a new name is a quintessential American act, a supreme gesture of self creation in the land where Norma Jean Baker became Marilyn Monroe, homosexuals became gays, and Esso became Exxon." (Lacayo, 1989, 32)

Names or labels that define groups help to determine how both in and agent group members respond to the group. "Words prefigure and control experience to some degree; they are not simply innocent labels." (Simpson and Yinger, 1972, 32) Symbols are part and parcel of reality itself. (Smith, 1988, 513.) It has become increasingly clear that some words and the thought processes they represent are hurtful in ways that cannot be remedied by cosmetic changes in terminology (e.g. from cripple to orthopedically handicapped or from defective children to exceptional children). (Meyerson, 1988, 175) For many years it was thought that to attempt to alter hurtful but traditional, social language patterns was an insuperable task. It remained for the women's movement and the African American community to shift the focus to the stimulus: to demand that language be changed and to show that some offensive language patterns can be altered. (Meyerson, 1988, 176)

Labels play an important role in defining groups and individuals who belong to the groups. This has been especially true for racial and ethnic groups. Over the past century the

standard term for Blacks has shifted from "colored" to "Negro" to "Black" to "African American." It should be noted that the alterations in racial labels represent changes in the acceptance of various labels, not the creation of new terms. The changes can be seen as attempts by African Americans to redefine themselves and to gain respect and standing in a society that has held them to be subordinate and inferior. While the preferred term has changed several times, the common goal for Blacks has been to find a group label that instills group pride and self esteem. (Smith, 1992, 497) In his discussion of the evolution of the use of various terms Smith notes that at one time "Black" was favored because of the natural balance it provided to the term "White." The changing of ethnic and racial labels is not particular to Blacks. In recent years the term "Hispanic" has replaced "Spanish speaking" and the term "Latino" has also established itself. Similarly "Oriental" has been supplanted by "Asian." (Smith, 1988, 510)

In 1985 Paul K. Longmore reflected on the common terminology used by both disabled and nondisabled people to identify or describe persons with a wide variety of disabilities. No attempt was made to quantify the frequency of usage of any terms, rather the focus was on the social meaning of this language and these terms. The language of disability demonstrates that people with disabilities are frequently perceived exclusively in terms of their disabilities. The community of disabled people is rarely contrasted or balanced with able bodied people. They are limited to a "handicapped role" in which they are seen as recipients of medical treatment. This role includes ascribed traits of dependency, helplessness, abnormality of appearance and mode of functioning, pervasive incapacitation and ultimately subhumanness.

Frequently used terms also express perceptions of helplessness and dependency: victim, abnormal, defective, infirm, invalid, unsound, maimed. (Longmore, 1985, 419) Many terms could be described as medical labels in that persons with disabilities are often described as patients, cases, or as sick with, afflicted by, suffering from, or stricken with one condition or another. Regardless of the social situation, people with disabilities are often labeled and perhaps viewed primarily as objects of medical treatment. Another set of terms substitute euphemistic labels in an attempt to weaken prejudice. A third "Politicized" language is being formulated by persons with disabilities which reflects a contemporary effort to escape the "handicapped role" and to create an alternative, self defined social identity. (Longmore, 1985, 419)

A persistently disturbing aspect of attitudes toward disability concerns the use of adjectives as nouns. Many people refer to disabled individuals as the deaf, the blind, etc. That more than a mere quirk of language is involved may be seen in the fact that the adjective as noun usage conspicuously deletes the humanizing people, person, individual and the like. The practice sets disabled people apart from nondisabled individuals and

cannot be discounted as of negligible importance. (Bowe, 1978, 127) While Longmore made no attempt to quantify the frequency of usage of any terms in 1985, he noted that the most common terms used to identify persons with disabilities are the handicapped, the disabled, the deaf, the blind, the mentally retarded, and 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 an individuality. (Longmore, 1985, 419)

All of the terms mentioned thus far imply a notion of social incapacitation which shows the disability as engulfing a person's social identity. Several terms referring to specific disabilities also contain the assumption that the physical or sensory condition taints the whole person. Words used to describe the appearance of a physically disabled person sometimes connote that the individual has lost some part of his or her humanity; for example, deformed or misshapen.

This stigmatizing language has evoked a reaction from persons with disabilities and their advocates, who include professionals who work with handicapped people, and parents of children with disabilities. These groups have propagated an array of substitutes for older, prejudicial terms. Among the euphemisms that try to get around the effects of prejudicial labeling are special, special needs, atypical, exceptional, and persons with exceptionalities. Yet even these terms continue to reinforce the perception of the essential differentness of disabled people and continue to put people with disabilities in a separate category from "normal" people. While these euphemisms may inadvertently reiterate the perception of disabled persons as a stigmatized minority, other euphemisms seem to avoid confronting that. For example, school children with disabilities are placed in special education or are mainstreamed. Yet another group of disability civil rights activists have attempted to deal with the issues of prejudice in language directly by giving a name to prejudice against disabled persons. The terms handicapism, physicalism, and normalism have been proposed. None of these terms has yet been widely accepted.

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. (Longmore, 1985, 422)

Diversity

Diversity is widely discussed in our society. There is legislation to ensure it and questions are often raised about whether there is enough diversity in the workplace, marketplace, government and media. But "disability is the neglected diversity, even as diversity representation by race, gender and sexual orientation has become a vogue topic of discussion for the media and society in general." (Hardin, 1999, 1) Perhaps this is because disability is not thought of by many as a diversity. "Yet, disability is, and individuals with mental and/or physical disabilities represent a significant minority population. But they continue to be ignored and stereotyped." (Hardin, 1999, 1) People with disabilities are the largest minority in the United States (National Council on the Handicapped, 1998; Office of Disability Management, 1999; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1998). The largest number of people with disabilities in the US have arthritis, followed by those with mental disorders (exclusive of substance abuse). Hearing impairments affect the third largest group (Center for Health Statistics, 1999). It is interesting to note though that wheelchair use has become the symbol of disability in news photos (Haller, 1995, 14) and on parking permits even though only .05% of the US population uses a wheelchair. Perhaps the government, as much as any other source has contributed to the redefinition and current definitions of disability.

Through legislation such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, federal policy makers established disabled people as a class to be protected from discrimination by federal law. The definitions included in the new laws focused on a broad group of people in a way that aided in the formation of a social movement. (Scotch, 1988, 167) For example the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 defined handicapped children as those evaluated as being mentally retarded, hard of hearing, deaf, speech impaired, visually handicapped, seriously emotionally disturbed, orthopedically impaired, other health impaired, deaf blind, multihandicapped, or as having specific learning disabilities.

There are differences between people with disabilities and other minorities. In the past people with disabilities constituted a group due to statistical classification based on abstractions. Although 1 in 11 Americans of working age identify themselves as having a disability (US Bureau of the Census, 1990) for many of them such self identification does not translate into group consciousness or political action. A "typical" disabled person does not exist nor does a psychology of disability because disabilities produce no firm, predictable effect. (Without Bias, 1977, 77).

Until as recently as the 1970s there was not a significant social movement of disabled people dedicated to the removal of the many barriers they face that deny full participation in American society. (Scotch, 1988, 159) This absence of community

has changed in recent years. A survey of a national sample of people with disabilities reported by Hill, Mehnert Taylor, Kagey, Leizhenko et al. in 1986 showed that 74% of respondents felt some sense of common identity with other disabled people and approximately 50% believed that people with disabilities are a minority group in the same sense as Blacks and Hispanics. (Fine & Asch, 1988, 7)

A number of disabled people who had been active in the social conflicts of the 1960s came to see their disability in the same political sense as blacks viewed their race or women their gender. (Scotch, 1988, 165) The definition of a minority group applies to people with disabilities. The criteria in the definition include: "identifiability, differential power, differential and pejorative treatment, and group awareness." (Dworkin and Dworkin, 1976, 7). Some feel that in most circumstances it may be more accurate to characterize people with disabilities as members of a social category rather than as an identifiable social or political group. To be perceived as disabled is typically to be seen as helpless and incompetent and many individuals with physical impairments seek to dissociate themselves from disability exercising what Goffman calls "role distance." (Scotch, 1988, 161)

## Media

In recent years people with disabilities have been in the news with increasing frequency. But their increasing visibility has raised questions about their representation. Among the most common charges brought against the news and entertainment media are: tokenism, unrealistic portrayals, negative stereotyping and under representation.

The conventions of the media may create an environment that is hostile to visible minorities, including people with disabilities, and which may be difficult to change. There is evidence that labels and names reinforce stereotypes. People with disabilities face ambiguous and sometimes rejecting social responses. (Comer & Piliavin, 1972; Kleck, 1966; Kleck, Hiroshi & Hastorf, 1966) For many people with disabilities, physical impairment is less handicapping than the barriers of stereotyped attitudes. (Scotch, 1988, 164)

While diversity of race, gender and sexual orientation in our media representations and research is important, it is ironic that our vision of diversity is so limited that it rarely includes disability. If educators and scholars continue to resist a progressive paradigm regarding disability issues, how can we expect the media to help society move beyond its limited and prejudiced understanding?" (Scotch, 1988, 161)

Media act as mechanisms in the social construction of people with disabilities. (Haller, 1998, 90) The United States has spent its entire history designing a country for nondisabled people,

thus excluding people with disabilities from buildings, transportation, educational and recreational programs, and communication methods. Because of these barriers, literature and mass media become crucial components in representing people with disabilities in society. (Bowe, 1978, 131)

It seems reasonable to postulate that exposure to mass media messages about the disabled community is one of the principal determinants of levels of knowledge of and about people with disability. Exposure to media messages is not sufficient to produce changes in attitudes and opinion, yet negative stereotypes can interfere with the acceptance of accurate information about people with disabilities. Our attitudes are important because they help shape and direct our actions. If we believe that people with disabilities are different we will continue to neglect their needs, (Bowe, 1978, 111) and to deal with and treat them separately and differently than we do non-disabled people.

We as a society "make disability" through our language, media and other public and visible ways. (Higgins, 1992) Studying media terms used to refer to people with disabilities may help us to understand the media's role in the construction of people with disabilities.

The use of traditional, stereotypic terms to refer to people with disabilities may result not only from traditional cultural norms and habits, but also from disability activists not pushing to educate journalists. After all, as Haller (1998, 97) notes, disability leaders were organizing, not dealing with the media. Therefore, the representations of disability protest are also a function of a disability rights movement still learning to fashion the news media image of disability. (Haller, 1998, 97)

In recent years media representations and portrayals of visible minorities have come under increasing scrutiny. Relatively few mass media studies assess media coverage based on disability. Studies based on groups such as gender, race or politics are more frequent. This is unfortunate in that relatively few Americans have sufficient, direct and personal contact with enough disabled people to be able to form accurate perceptions of them. Thus, media assume added importance. When looking at perceptions of people with disabilities, literature and mass media may be even more powerful than personal contact because one's interaction with disabled people may be restricted by the barriers of architecture, transportation or communication. (Bowe, 1978, 131)

Researchers have studied the mass media to assess whether disabled persons are inaccurately or negatively portrayed because of their physical and social deviations. (Dillon, Byrd, and Byrd, 1980; Bonstetter, 1986; Klobas, 1988) Among the various studies of national media coverage of disability rights and activism that have been conducted the primary focus has been on amount of coverage various events received and categorization of media representation or portrayals of disability. (Haller, 1993 & 1995)

Haller, in a study on the way in which photos and TV video

segments are shot with regards to camera angle, "illustrates that even something as subtle as a camera angle can reinforce both traditional and progressive cultural representations." (Haller, 1995, 15) Haller has noted that "more important than the amount of coverage of the media event is the news stories' rhetoric." (Haller, 1998, 92-93). Tom Brokaw's voice over of coverage of a disability rights "crawl in" at the US Capitol on NBC on March 13, 1990, associates disadvantage with disability. Brokaw tells TV viewers that people with disabilities are "less fortunate," "less privileged," and "desperate." (Haller, 1998, 93) Language in print stories included *Time* magazines' framing of disability activists as "supercrips" who are doing amazing things in the name of protest. (Haller, 1998, 94)

### Research Question

How are persons with disabilities identified in the mass media? The current study examines articles concerning persons with disabilities provided to the national media by The Disability News Service, Inc. and by Associated Press to determine what terms are utilized to refer to the community of the disabled and its members and whether there is a difference in terms utilized to refer to the community of the disabled and its members between these two sources.

The use of terms to refer to people with disabilities in news stories is significant because how people with disabilities are referred to addresses how US society is or is not changing its treatment of the community of people with disabilities. While an examination of terms used to refer to people with disabilities may be a small component of a news story, it has many implications in terms of representation. There are important distinctions between the terms impairment, disability and handicap (Scheer & Groce, 1988, 23-24).

Impairment describes an abnormality or loss of a physiological structure or function. Disability refers to the consequences of an impairment - that is, a restriction or lack of ability to perform some activity as considered appropriate. Handicap means a social disadvantage that results from an impairment or disability. An impairment does not necessarily produce a disability and a disability need not be a handicap - the latter two terms are socially defined. For instance, today poor eyesight is not considered a handicap because it can be corrected with eyeglasses, but in a subsistence hunting culture it might be a serious handicap.

The term "the disabled" is less desirable than "people with disabilities" because the former implies that a person's disability is synonymous or coextensive with the person him/herself rather than just one of many personal characteristics. That implication is deeply resented by people who know that they are much more than their blindness or missing limb. (Oskamp, 1988, ii) Disabling images are reinforced by the very language used to characterize disability. The labeling of people with disabilities categorizes them apart from the rest of

the population, somehow more different than like others.

#### Purpose

Higgins (1992) notes that as a society we "make disability" through language, media and other public ways. Studying print media's use of terms to refer to people with disabilities helps to create an understanding of the role the media play in "constructing" people with disabilities. It is critical to understand attitudinal barriers because attitudes influence and can underlie actions. If disabled people are defined by their disabilities, not by their abilities, then public actions and policies may reflect these attitudes. This study identifies some of the communication barriers that may increase the social and physical isolation commonly faced by people with disabilities. This study may sensitize readers to the ways in which the language in the media can stigmatize, can imply inequality and can marginalize certain people or groups of people. It may also help to explain changing self-perceptions as well as dominant social attitudes and perhaps build acceptance of a positive image of people with disabilities through highlighting of misconceptions perpetuated through labels.

#### Methods

The researcher examined the news stories that mention people with disabilities or were about issues that directly affect people with 15 disabilities, made available on line by the wire services AP (Associated Press) and DNS (the Disability News Service) from July through December 1999. All news stories released by DNS on line were examined. All stories that AP provided on-line that were indexed through a list serve under the terms "disability," "the disabled," or "handicapped" were examined for terms referring to people with disabilities.

A strong influence on what the public receives is exerted by the two major wire services, Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI). They have set writing and editing styles for newspapers, radio, television and even magazines in the United States for over forty years. While many media outlets have their own stylebooks, AP and UPI style is usually at their core. The influence of these services' styles (which are substantially the same) is further ingrained in our public media by their extensive use in our journalism schools. In 1977 a joint committee expanded and revised AP and UPI style guidelines in recognition of social changes and since then the services have considered additional revisions. Reflected in these guidelines and various versions they have spawned are concerns about equal treatment of various groups. (Without Bias, 1977, 159)

Additionally, Associated Press was chosen because it is the oldest operating wire service in the US that serves the national media. The Disability News Service, Inc. is a for-profit company based in Chantilly, Virginia, that was founded in August 1977. It was selected because it was the first and is the oldest news service in the US to regularly provide disability related news

and information to the national media.

There are limitations to this study. It did not examine placement or content of stories released online nor did it determine which of these stories were picked up and used by various media outlets.

#### Findings

Fortyone (41) stories about people with disabilities were released online by the wire service AP during the time period from July through December 1999. In these stories one hundred and nineteen (119) references were made to people with disabilities. The terms used were:

TERM	FREQUENCY
amputee	2
blind	6
confined to a wheelchair	1
crippled by polio	1
deaf	8
disabled athlete(s)	2
disabled by cerebral palsy	1
disabled employees(s)	1
disabled person (people)	24
handicapped	6
multiply handicapped	3
person (persons, people) with a disability(ies)	21
physically challenged	1
quadra(or para)plegic	3
retarded girl	2
the disabled	30
the mentally ill	6
victim of muscular dystrophy	1

One hundred and eight (108) stories about people with disabilities were released on line by DNS during this time period. In these stories three hundred and thirty seven (337) references were made to people with disabilities. The terms used were:

TERM	FREQUENCY
Americans with mental disorders	1
blind	8
child with a disability	2
children with disabilities	1
deaf	11
disabled athlete(s)	1
disabled employee(s)	1
disabled people	3

disabled student(s)	1
individuals with disabilities	61
individual with an identifiable disability	1
paralyzed	1
person (persons, people) with a disability(ies)	202
person with mental illness	16
persons with mental retardation	15
the disabled	5
the disability community	1
the mentally ill	4
the mentally disabled	2

AP used 18 different terms to refer to people with disabilities while DNS used 19. Of those terms, 8 were used by both services. These were: blind, deaf, disabled athlete, disabled employee, disabled people, person (persons, people) with a disability(ies), the disabled, mentally ill.

Their frequency of use was as follows:

	AP%	DNS%
blind	5.0%	2.4%
deaf	6.7%	3.3%
disabled athlete	1.7%	0.2%
disabled employee	0.8%	0.2%
disabled people	20.0%	0.8%
person (persons, people) with a disability(ies)	18.0%	60.0%
the disabled	25.0%	1.4%
mentally ill	4.2%	1.1%

The term most commonly used by AP was "the disabled" (25%). The term most commonly used by DNS was "person (persons, people) with a disability(ies)" (60%). It should be noted that the term "person (persons, people) with a disability(ies)" was the second most frequently used term by AP( 18%).

#### Discussion

Was the terminology used to refer to people with disabilities contained in stories released online by DNS different than the terminology used by AP? Yes. While it seems that both wire services disseminate information that focuses public attention on people with disabilities using similar terms, DNS appears to attempt to put the person before the disability more often than AP. DNS more frequently uses terminology to describe individuals with disabilities that focuses on the person and not the disability, such as persons with disabilities, not the disabled or the handicapped. Of the 19 different terms used

by DNS 8 of them put people first. These terms were used in 299 out of 337 references or 89% of the time. Of the 18 terms used by AP 2 of them put people first. These terms were used in 22 out of 119 references, or 18% of the time.

#### Observations

While the method of this study did not include categorization of story by type it should be noted that mainstream media does not often focus on people with disabilities as equal citizens by focusing on mainstream activities unrelated to the disability. The researcher observed a tendency for AP to present people with disabilities in "social problem" contexts. Among stories that did this were those concerned with legislation (enacted specifically to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities), accessibility, education, training, employment, and rehabilitation services.

The media is in a position to effect change and has probably changed significantly itself as evidenced by the relatively limited use of discriminatory and stigmatizing terminology found in the stories examined for this study. But the media has not yet eliminated the use of depersonalizing terminology with regard to persons with disabilities. Both AP and to a lesser degree, DNS continue to employ depersonalizing terminology.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

There is a need for much additional research in this field. Work could be undertaken to promote the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of media language choice on attitudes toward persons with disabilities.

The frequency of appearance of stories dealing with people with disabilities should be examined. It would appear that at present such stories are relatively infrequent. US news rooms could examine and reevaluate how they cover the disabled community.

Some of this research could be used to develop guidelines and suggest training for media personnel on communications about people with disabilities. Specifically it could be used to assist in the development of communication to counter misinformation about disability and persons with disabilities and to help shape more positive attitudes toward them. Given the varied nature of disability, no complete list of examples can be developed that will guide the journalist through every circumstance. Personal judgement must serve as a guide and at the heart of that judgement is attitude. (Without Bias, 1977, 79)

Finally, more study is needed about cues in the US media representations of people with disabilities because of the reactions of the nondisabled population to the population with disabilities. (Haller, 1995, 16)

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Karen Finlon Dajani, Ph.D., is Associate Professor in the Communication Department of Chatham College, Pittsburgh, PA 15232.