Differences in the Language Used by Disability Professionals: Accessible Summary

By Carli Friedman (CQL), Liz Weintraub (AUCD), and Zach Gordon (AAIDD)

Ableism is when people with disabilities are treated poorly or discriminated against. Sometimes they are thought to be worse than people without disabilities. One way people can be ableist is by using language that is harmful and shares ideas that having a disability is bad.

Some ableist language is easier to recognize as bad (this is called obvious), such as the ‘R-word’ (retarded). Sometimes people use this language to hurt people. But some ableist language is more difficult to recognize as bad (this is called subtle). Examples are the terms ‘differently abled’ or ‘suffering from mental illness.’ A lot of this subtle language tries not to talk about disability, implying that it is too bad to talk about. It can also make people feel sad. Some of this subtle language also implies that disability is something negative people suffer from, instead of just a part of their identity and who they are.

People who work with people with disabilities or who study disability (called disability professionals) have a long history of using hurtful language about disability. In this study, we were interested in learning more about the language disability professionals use and if they know they are using ableist language.

About This Study

A total of 347 disability professionals completed our online survey. Most people did not have disabilities and were white, and women. The disability professionals had a lot of different jobs, including support staff, health care provider (like doctor), educators, and researchers.

In the survey, we asked people to select from a list what disability words they used. The list included obviously bad words, more subtle words, and some other random disability words. We also asked them to select which words they thought were problematic. Problematic can mean upsetting, horrible, nasty, or ableist. We then looked at the information to see if different disability professionals used words in different ways.
Findings

We found a lot of differences in how disability professionals used words based on their backgrounds:

**Having a disability**
People without disabilities were more likely to use subtly ableist words than people with disabilities. But some people with disabilities also used ableist language. We think this is because the world is very ableist so they may have learned those lessons from the world.

**Having a family member or friend with a disability**
There were a few differences in language use if disability professionals had family members or friends with disabilities but not a lot. We think this is because of the world’s ideas about disability and because having a disability yourself is different than having a family member or friend with a disability.

**Health Care Providers**
Health care providers (like doctors) were less likely to find ‘handicap’ and ‘handicapable’ problematic. They did this even though these terms are old and should not be used.

**Support Staff, Frontline Supervisors, and Support Coordinators**
People who worked more directly with people with disabilities, including support staff, frontline supervisors (the boss of support staff), and support coordinators (also called case managers), were more likely to use subtly ableist terms. For example, they used ‘special needs’ more. This can hurt the people with disabilities they work with.

**People Working In Quality Management**
People in quality management (whose job it is to make services better) were more likely to say words were problematic. But they did not use fewer ableist words even though they knew they were problematic.
Findings

People Working in Research and Higher Education
Disability researchers and people in higher education (academics) used more obviously ableist words and didn’t think as many of these words were problematic. A lot of these words related to how smart people are, such as ‘stupid’, ‘dumb,’ and ‘idiot.’

How Long People Work in The Disability Field
The longer disability professionals worked in the disability field, the more obvious words they thought were problematic. It could be that people learn more the longer they work in the disability field.

Other Differences
Older people used fewer obvious ableist words than younger people.

Liberal people (sometimes called democrats) were more likely to find subtle words problematic than conservative people (sometimes called republicans).

Findings related to gender and race identity were hard to make sense of. More research is needed to learn more.

There were a few differences in language use based on what country people lived in. These differences may be because of how disability is understood in each country.

We found a lot of differences in how disability professionals used language based on their backgrounds. But most disability professionals used at least some ableist language. Because of this, we believe disability professionals need better education about disability and language.