

Episode 4.5: Labels and Language of Autism: Person-First vs Identity-First

Overview

Language is important and can influence our perspectives of people. Many teachings in recent decades have focused on what is termed “person-first” language, where you say “person with x” instead of “x person.” For some diagnoses this is the preferred term, but there are many groups where it is actively rejected by the majority of members. In the autism community there is a strong preference for “identity first” language - I am autistic, not a person with autism, because my autism is an inherent part of who I am. We also look at other terms and the use of euphemisms such as “special needs” and do a brief feature on another famous autistic in popular culture, Tee Williams, writer for DC comics.

Key Points:

- The goal of person-first language is to separate the person from the diagnosis - someone is not a depressed person, they are a person with depression. However, autism is not a separate condition, it is an inherent part of who we are and how we interact in the world. There is no version of me that is not autistic, it is my identity. This is a common perspective within the autistic community, despite disagreements from non-autistic professionals, so in most situations it is better to use “autistic person” than “person with autism.”
- However, labels are deeply personal, so while it is important to look to communities to see what are the general current preferences and use them, people should always be given space to self-identity with the label that feels most right to them.
- Time: 13:13

Quotes:

“This was recorded in September 2021, I have no doubt things will change in the future, so when in doubt look to current communities and see what they are saying now.”

“Autistic writers have reported their articles have been edited to change their language for themselves to meet ‘industry best practices’ to change them from being an ‘autistic person’ to a ‘person with autism,’ without recognizing that their preference should take precedence.”

“The idea still focuses on the concept that autism is bad, that being defined that way is somehow bad too. Autism is not a bad word and treating it as such will not improve the daily systemic ableism we face in the world.”

“A study from 2016 titled “‘Special needs’ is an ineffective euphemism,’ unsurprisingly given the title, found that when people were given a brief description of a person that included labels of special needs, disabled, person with x disability, and such were then asked to share their perception of the person, the label special needs was associated with more negative views of individuals that the word disability was, and in word associate exercises it likewise was connected more to negative perceptions.”

“Ableism is deeply ingrained into our culture, and there are many changes that happen in language as we examine different labels used and consider the impacts they have. Many phrases that were common clinical descriptors in the past have been phased out entirely with good reason, but it’s always important to check in and see what people within a given community feel about language, and to update it as

preferences change.”

“As my cats will attest, there is a huge difference between someone putting you in a box versus a box you pick yourself.”

Articles referenced:

Kristen Bottema-Beutel, Steven K. Kapp, Jessica Nina Lester, Noah J. Sasson, and Brittany N. Hand. Autism in Adulthood. Mar 2021.18-29. <http://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0014>

Gernsbacher, M.A., Raimond, A.R., Balinghasay, M.T. et al. “Special needs” is an ineffective euphemism. Cogn. Research 1, 29 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-016-0025-4>

<https://awnnetwork.org/failings-person-first-language/#>

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/identity-first-language/>

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