

An Invitation to Think About Language in the Classroom

The language we use in classrooms shapes the kind of community we create – and thus affects the sense of belonging (or not) that our students may experience. The language we use also communicates (unintentionally or intentionally) value judgements and specific narratives about public health and the field of biostatistics. While thinking carefully about language is not enough to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities to be successful in a course, it is an important place to start. Below we give an extremely short primer to help encourage people to begin thinking about the language they use.

There are two questions that are important to ask when engaging with language:

1. Does the language that I am using have the potential to dehumanize, other, or stigmatize people? (does it potentially delegitimize anyone's identity?)
2. If so, is it critical to the point I am trying to convey? (and is that point critical to students' understandings of core class material?)

If the answer to the first is yes, and to the second is no, then it seems uncontroversial that the language should be changed. And we have yet to identify a question in biostatistics where the answer to both the first and second questions is yes.

Next, we give some examples of language that we try not to use and examples of alternatives (there are certainly other alternatives that could also work well!)

Instead of “Drug abuser” perhaps consider “Person with a drug use disorder”

The first might be seen to a) reduce a person to that single characteristic; and b) blame the person for their disorder (which implies [specific narratives about who is to blame and how to solve drug misuse](#)¹). The second begins with a reminder that we are talking about a person, and notes that their drug use is a disorder that we are trying to support the person in recovering from. On a similar note, a variable for “smoker” could be replaced with a variable for “smoking”.

Instead of “Homeless person” perhaps consider “Person who is unhoused”

The first might be seen to indicate that “homeless” is the defining characteristic of a person. In addition, one can have a [home that is not a traditional housing structure](#)².

Instead of “Diabetic” perhaps consider “Person with diabetes”

As in the other examples, the first might be seen as reducing a person to one characteristic.

In all examples above, our suggested alternatives used “person-first language.” Person-first language is a useful way to try to humanize whomever you are discussing (though its importance may depend on how stigmatized a given characteristic is, and additionally it may not always be adequate on its own). In some cases, people may not feel stigmatized by the original language, but it seems there is little to no downside (and large potential upside) in being careful nonetheless.

Language is also important in specifying/differentiating between sex and gender: While there is much subtlety here, most simply, sex is a biological variable related to chromosomes and/or primary/secondary sex characteristics, while [gender is non-biological and related to social](#)

[presentation and self-perception](#)³. In biomedical studies, it has been much more common to consider sex than gender (though sex is sometimes/often labelled incorrectly as “gender”). Depending on how data is collected, it may be unclear whether a variable represents sex, gender, or a complicated combination of the two.

In addition, “sex” is generally specified as a binary variable in datasets where it appears. One might refer to that as “binarized sex” noting that it precludes people who are intersex, or artificially places them into one of the categories. One might also make clear that while there are statistical reasons for using fewer categories, this also has the effect of marginalizing intersex people (whether intentional or not), and that is a tension that we have to grapple with. Lastly it can be useful to employ gender-neutral language whenever specifying gender is not necessary.

Similarly, it is useful to acknowledge that using discrete race categories in statistical analyses is an approximation that leaves out people who are multiracial or whose identity does not fit into the small number of commonly used categories. It is also important to avoid conflating race and ethnicity, which are socially defined identities, with genetic ancestry. Related to this, one might avoid using the word “Caucasian”, and/or note that it is [linked to historical racial hierarchy](#)⁴.

In closing, it is most important that we create classroom cultures where we make clear that:

1. We care about respecting the worth, dignity, and common humanity of everyone
2. We are open to feedback!

Additional discussion here:

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/hammer-on-the-abusers-mass-attorney-general-alleges-purdue-pharma-tried-to-shift-blame-for-opioid-addiction/2019/01/15/4af25c4c-190c-11e9-88fe-f9f77a3bcb6c_story.html
2. <https://www.seattleweekly.com/news/why-kirsten-harris-talley-makes-a-point-of-using-the-word-houselessness/>
3. <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/sex-gender-identity>
4. <https://www.sapiens.org/column/race/caucasian-terminology-origin/>
5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6042508/>