

## Tackling terminology relating to Disability

Issues relating to terminology in an age of “political correctness” continue to spark discussion and debate throughout a range of equity partners and beyond; terms of reference to describe people, introduce people, and explain situations are perceived to be highly sensitive and ultimately result in issues which really should be addressed.

The purpose of this piece is to respond to concerns relating to what words should and shouldn't be used, and perhaps some indication as to why that is. However, the words selected and identified below, appear because they are still in common phrasing and are unanimously (within the UK) struck-off the list of the acceptable words. Even though a lot of the following words may be considered euphemisms by the user, they are not accepted for the following reasons:

### **Handicapped**

It's meaning links to a disadvantage being imposed on some one, and suggests helplessness. Not used within Britain, and has been replaced with disabled person/person with a disability, or perhaps an impairment specific term.

### **Retarded (mentally retarded, retard)**

All of the above terms are considered offensive and outdated within the UK when used in the context of disability. An acceptable alternative would be disabled person/person with a disability, or perhaps learning disability/person with a learning disability.

### **Cripple**

Dictionaries tend to define this term as one which means “causing damage to someone or something, making them weak or ineffective”. For obvious reasons this is considered outdated and unacceptable. The same alternatives apply as with the term handicapped, plus other possibilities such as: physical disability/impairment, Cerebral Palsy, Spina Bifida, etc.

### **Dumb**

The term dumb is used within the context of stupidity, but may be used to refer to a person who has communication difficulties. Historically it was used in the in conjunction with Deaf (i.e. deaf and dumb), but is considered unacceptable now whether used alone or in conjunction with other words regarding disability. An acceptable alternative would be speech and language difficulty.

### **Spastic**

This is a dated phrase (although still used within medical circles) which implies stupidity, clumsy or inept. Clearly none of these inferences are appropriate and are considered derogatory. This term became particularly associated with people with Cerebral Palsy (CP) because of the charity “The Spastics Society” (now known as SCOPE). Again, similar alternatives as for handicapped would apply.

### **Normal**

Refers to a lack of deviation from average, but it becomes very difficult to identify what constitutes “normal”. Often used within the context of disability in the following ways “normal people and disabled people” therefore inferring that disabled people are not normal. It would be much more appropriate to use “non-disabled and disabled people” (if there is an absolute need to define people in that way at all).

### **Suffers from ...**

This is an assumption generally made by non-disabled people about disabled people, that by having a disability they will be suffering from it. It infers and reinforces notions of pity, rather than autonomy, independence and power. If there is a need to identify or discuss an individual’s disability with a third party or with the disabled person then remove the “suffers from...” i.e. “Bill has Downs Syndrome”, rather than “Bill suffers from Downs Syndrome”.

### **Able-bodied**

Not necessarily as contentious or offensive, but it is inaccurate if all people with disabilities (learning, sensory and physical) are associated with not being able-bodied. To use the terms able-bodied and disabled, there is a presumption that all disabled people are not able-bodied. People with a learning disability, for example, may not have a physical disability, and therefore are able-bodied. As a preference therefore, someone without a disability should be referred to as “non-disabled”.

### **Invalid**

This is possibly one of the most contentious of the “inappropriate” terms, because it is interpreted as being in-valid. Clearly people with and without disability are equally valid, and therefore referring to one group as “invalid” is not appropriate. Use disabled person/person with a disability instead.

Whilst the collective “we” may read the above list and be reassured that we don’t use such terms, it is important to stress that a lot of the time it is more often than not the ways in which the terms are used, who they are addressed to, and how they are addressed that cause the offence, rather than just the words themselves. If at all possible, try to avoid referring to people by their impairment group, i.e. “you know ... the person with Cerebral Palsy...” even where the use of that impairment group is replacing an unacceptable term. So, although preferable, it is not ideal to replace “you know...the spastic” with “you know the person with Cerebral Palsy” (obviously the ideal would be to say “you know ... Fred”, assuming the person’s name was Fred of course!) However if it is necessary to refer to the impairment, then there are acceptable ways of identifying these and you should try to establish them with the relevant individual or organisation.

Considering some of the basic implications relating to how we talk to people, and some fundamental rules which will therefore enable all of us to avoid the risk of causing offence, and feel confident about working and interacting within disability settings, is potentially much more useful than just being aware of what we shouldn’t say. The following basic considerations may therefore provide some useful guidance:

### **Basic consideration 1: Person first terminology**

There was a move at the end of the 1990’s towards person-first terminology, which is a linguistic technique intended to avoid dehumanising people with disabilities by putting the focus on the person rather than the disability (i.e. “person with a disability”). The assumption being that the terms are conjoined in order of importance, so when using “disabled person” the emphasis is on the disability rather than the fact that the point of reference is a person. However, a significant number of

disabled people consider their disability to be a fundamental part of their identity and by placing disability second, their identity is devalued. Check whether the organisation you are working for has any guidance regarding terminology protocol; if you are talking to a disabled person/person with a disability, then listen to what they say and how they say it, and use terminology consistent with that.

### **Basic consideration 2: Talk to the person**

Whether in or out of the sporting setting avoid the common misconception that if a disabled person is accompanied by someone, then that person must be their carer, and as a consequence direct comments, questions, introductions, statements to that “carer” rather than the disabled person themselves. Address the person you are talking to, and if that is the disabled person then talk to them, ask them the questions; if the person accompanying them is there to support them, then they will lend their support in an appropriate manner (i.e. signing, clarifying, and interpreting, etc). Above all avoid doing things like saying “will s/he want to participate...?” – ask the person! By not talking to the person you want the information from, or are directing information to, and talking to the accompanying third party you are directly identifying that because the person has a disability they must be incapable of communication.

Additionally, when you do communicate with the disabled person ensure you do so in a manner which is appropriate to that person, and allow them sufficient time to provide you with a response (i.e. don’t finish their sentences or assume that they are going to give you a particular response in a specific format).

For further guidance about terminology with regard to disability, please access your Nations disability sport organisation’s Website where you will find contact details, methods of obtaining advice or, if it exists, information about their Disability Equity / Awareness Training course:

- Wales, [FDSW](#)
- Scotland, [SDS](#)
- Northern Ireland, [DSNI](#)
- England, [EFDS](#).

## Tackling Terminology Relating to Women and Girls

Despite the Sex Discrimination Act being introduced in 1975, there is still a predominance of terminology within society which excludes Women and girls. It is very difficult to promote positive images of both women and men, if women are excluded by the language used. Language should reflect the visibility of females, both as employees and as service users, to ensure that their contribution is recognised and their service needs identified and met.

People who talk about sport, particularly those responsible for making decisions and delivery, have an important opportunity to expand upon the progress that has been made in women's sports participation. By use of language that is inclusive of women, they can subtly but powerfully reduce the perception that women's sports are add-ons, auxiliaries or less important than men's sports and increase the notion that they are important and integral in their own right.

### **Gender Neutral Language**

The English language appears to have evolved on the assumption that the world is male. We refer to 'the man in the street', or 'manning the phones', and talk about the 'tax man', 'layman's terms', 'as every schoolboy knows' and so on. Until recently, much of our public language has referred only to the male gender. This approach can make women and their contribution to society seem invisible.

With a little thought, imagination and no great effort, it is easy to ensure that the language we use is not gender specific and includes everyone in any reference to people in general. Use 'he or she' and 'his or her' when referring to no-one in particular. In many cases the text can be rephrased so that it avoids reference to either gender. For example, it is often tidier and easier to read when avoiding using 'he' or 'she' and replacing with the plural 'they'.

### **Parallel Language**

In the context of sport, we still hear the language used in a number of ways that convey the secondary status of women. For example, teams referred to by just club, city or country name are male, while the "women" or "lady" tags are used for the women's teams. Equitable, inclusive language requires that if the feminine tags are used for the women's teams, masculine tags should be used for the men's teams. This is called parallel language.

The same thing happens in talking about leagues or tournaments. In football there is the Premier League and the Women's Premier League, in golf the PGA and the LPGA. It is unlikely that the term men's or gentlemen's will ever be introduced formally in the same way but subtle shifts towards equal importance can be achieved by a verbal or written distinction between what is a men's event or team and a women's.

### **Devaluing Terminology**

As with much of language, the terms available to refer to women carry far more overtones and suggestive meanings than those for referring to men. The use of

trivialising or degrading expressions is not appropriate. For example, there are particular issues around the use of 'girl'. Adult females should be referred to as women not girls. There is no set age at which a girl becomes a woman, but a reasonable guide and is that after 16 she is no longer a 'girl'. However, adult women are often referred to as 'girls' as in 'the girls in the office', for example. Generally no offence will be intended, or taken, but adults should not be referred to as children.

### **Summary of advice**

The above can best be summarised into the following pointers:

- Whenever possible, ask the individual or organisation what is their preferred terminology
- Avoid gender specific, and use gender neutral, language
- Avoid gender tags when they detract from equality, such as in job titles
- Use male tags when female tags are used (parallel language)
- Avoid terms such as girls (when referring to adults), lady, love, darling, pet
- Use 'Ms' if the marital status or preference is not known
- Use the same conventions for addressing women and men
- If the name and gender of the recipient is not known when writing, use 'Dear Sir or Madam'
- Do not make assumptions about anyone's relationship or personal life, such as caring responsibilities.

For advice on specific situations, contact either the Women's Sports foundation (WSF) by clicking on [www.wsf.org.uk/contact](http://www.wsf.org.uk/contact) or the Equal Opportunities Commission via email [info@eoc.org.uk](mailto:info@eoc.org.uk).

## Tackling Terminology Relating to People from Ethnic Minorities

### **African, Caribbean and/or African-Caribbean**

African-Caribbean has replaced the term Afro-Caribbean to refer to Caribbean peoples and those of Caribbean origin who are of African descent. There is now a view that the term should not be hyphenated and that indeed, the differences between such groups mean the people of African and Caribbean origins should be referred to separately.

### **Asian/South Asian**

In the UK Asian generally refers to people from the Asian sub-continent: namely, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kashmir.

Under some circumstances there may be objections to bracketing together a wide variety of different cultural and ethnic groups often with very different positions within British society. The term South Asian is more precise and Asian on its own should not be used if it risks confusing South Asian people with those from other parts of Asia, such as Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese people.

Some members of particular ethnic groups may object to being referred to by their "country of origin" when they have been living for several generations in Britain.

### **Black**

Black is a term that embraces people who experience structural and institutional discrimination because of their skin colour and is often used politically to refer to people of African, Caribbean and South Asian origin to imply solidarity against racism.

Some South Asian groups in Britain object to the use of the word "black" being applied to them. Some sociologists argue that it also groups a number of ethnic groups that should be regarded separately - Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Indians and so on.

Whilst there are many differences between and within each of the groups, the inclusive term "black" refers to those who have a shared history of European colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, ethnocentrism and racism. One solution to this is to refer to "black peoples", "black communities" etc., in the plural to imply that there are a variety of such groups.

It is also important to be aware of the fact that in some contexts "black" can also be used in a racist sense.

### **British**

Hyphenated or twinned designations such as 'Black British', 'British Asian' and 'Chinese British' are becoming more common ways to refer to second and third generation people, many of whom have been born in Britain, but wish to retain a sense of their origins. One advantage of such designations is that it avoids a suggestion that a person has to choose between them for their identity.

However, the idea of "British" can imply a false sense of unity. Many Scots, Welsh and Irish resist being identified as British and the territory denoted by the term contains a wide variety of cultures, language and religions.

### **Coloured**

This term is regarded as outdated in the UK and should be avoided as it is generally viewed as offensive to many black people. When applied to South Africa, the term reflects issues of ethnic divide and apartheid, and needs to be contextualised and used with specificity.

### **Classifications**

For the purpose of Equal Opportunities policies and benchmarking, most employers are now using the categories devised for the Census in the UK. However, no single classification system is universally accepted and there may be other terms that are required in specific contexts. Ethnic and/or racial classifications are often a confused mixture of skin colour and geographical origins. It is clear that there are problems when accounting for people of mixed heritage and the "other" category sometimes becomes an amalgam of people who do not feel they fit anywhere.

### **Ethnic**

Refers to cultural groups of various kinds. Although it is often erroneously used to refer to Black communities only, all people have ethnicity so that white people are also part of particular ethnic groups. To avoid this confusion, it is best to spell out the relevant ethnic groups explicitly, where this is appropriate depends upon the context.

### **Ethnocentric**

A tendency to perceive the world from the point of view of one's own culture. Ethnocentrism can lead to racism when applied to issues of race.

### **Half-Caste**

A dated racist term which is to be avoided. (See also 'Mixed Race').

### **Host Society**

An outdated term that implies a false sense of unity in the "host" society and conveys a sense of incomers as being somehow alien. It is preferable to talk of a society receiving migrants.

### **Immigrants**

Under some circumstances people could correctly be described as immigrants - if they are in-migrants from one place to another. However, this is not a useful term for referring to ethnic groups which have been in Britain since the early post-war period and in the British context has racist overtones, being associated with immigration legislation.

### **Indian**

In a US context, this word is often used to refer to indigenous Americans. However, the term is associated with racism and is also confusing since it also describes people from India. Use Native American instead.

### **Minority Ethnic/ Black and minority ethnic (BME)**

These terms are commonly used in public policy and in voluntary services. Minority ethnic is preferred to ethnic minority because it stresses that everyone belongs to an ethnic group.

### **Mixed Race**

This is a misleading term since it implies that a "pure race" exists. Alternatives include "mixed parentage" and "dual heritage".

### **Mixed-Cultural**

This is thought by some to be a neutral way of describing the variety of ethnic cultures and peoples in Britain. However, others object to this term on the grounds that it assumes that all cultures are equal and overlooks relations of power and domination that rank cultures differentially.

### **Non-White**

This is a problematic term because it groups and homogenises a large part of the world's population by what they are not. It also implies that "white" is the norm against which 'otherness' is measured.

### **Racism**

An ideology, structure and process in which inequalities inherent in the wider social structure are related in a predictable way to biological and cultural factors attributed to those who are seen as a different "race" or ethnic group.

Racism is created and reproduced out of a complex set of circumstances. A variety of attitudes, practices and types of behaviour which may not necessarily be overt or intentional but which serve to discriminate against or to marginalise people judged to be of another "race".

### **Refugee**

Anyone who has been granted asylum under the United Nation Convention, to which the UK is a signatory along with 144 other countries. The precise legal definition in Article 1 of the Convention refers to a "refugee" as a person who: "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."

### **West Indian**

This term is used to refer to people from the West Indian territories, a region that is highly culturally diverse. "African Caribbean" has generally replaced it when referring to people of African descent. However, caution must be applied in using this term as it also homogenises distinct groups of Black people.

Further information on British Sociological Association language guidance can be found at [BSA](#).

## Tackling Terminology Relating to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People

This is the fourth piece in this series and looks at terminology relating to lesbian, gay and bisexual people. A full introduction to the matter of terminology, which places the information provided into general context, can be found in the June 2007 edition of the newsletter. Thanks to Ruth Hunt and Sam Dick from Stonewall for their help in providing the information below.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people can be excluded by language and behaviour which assumes everyone is heterosexual. We all need to be aware that what we say or write may be heard or read by some one who is lesbian, gay or bisexual. We therefore need to use language which is inclusive and will not cause offence.

There are many words and phrases that are used to refer to sexual orientation in derogatory ways. To avoid any misunderstanding people should stick to using the words lesbian, gay or bisexual, even though they may hear LGB people choosing to speak about themselves differently. Some women, for instance, may refer to themselves as gay women rather than as lesbians. If you are dealing with an individual, and you need to refer to their sexual orientation, but are unsure, the best guide is to ask politely what word the person prefers and make certain that they are comfortable having this referred to before going any further.

### **Including Women**

On the whole, the word gay can be taken as referring to both men and women, as in the Gay Olympics. However, it is more commonly used to describe men than women. Inappropriate use of language can make women less visible than men. Referring only to 'gay people' or the 'gay community' may have that effect. Try and refer to 'lesbian, gay and bisexual people'; this includes women who prefer the term gay, as well as gay men.

### **“Lifestyle choices”**

When referring to lesbian, gay and bisexual people do not use phrases which imply that sexual orientation is a choice. Generally, it is not suggested that heterosexual people make a “choice” to be straight, so it should not be implied that gay people do. Avoid stereotyping and the use of words that have negative connotations.

### **Bisexuality**

It is important to be aware that people who are bisexual may not wish to be presumed heterosexual, any more than do lesbians or gay men. It is important therefore to use the phrase “lesbian, gay and bisexual people” because this is more inclusive.

### **Homosexual**

The term ‘homosexual’ is rarely used by the gay community because it was the term used by health professionals to describe lesbian, gay and bisexual people and their supposed mental health difficulties. As being gay is no longer a medical concern, this word is no longer appropriate. People of different generations may use different language to define their sexual orientation. For example, some older people may

define themselves as homosexual rather than gay or lesbian because this is the word they are familiar with. However the word homosexual is rarely used by younger LGB people to describe themselves, nor is it used by the government, and is often seen as derogatory.

### **Assumptions and inferences**

As with any group, avoid making assumptions. Do not assume someone's partner will be of the opposite sex, but if people refer to "their partner", do not assume this means they are of the same sex. As mentioned in the article above, do not assume that boys who wish to dance are gay, nor that girls who want to play rugby are lesbian.

No inference about someone's sexual orientation should be made if they do not want to talk about it. For example, do not assume someone is lesbian or gay because they do not wish to disclose their sexual orientation.

For more information about terminology visit [www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk) or for specific advice, contact Sam Dick, on 020 7593 1850.

## Tackling Terminology Relating to Age

The old and the young often have different perceptions and values, and others have different perceptions of them, but we are all members of the same society and have the right to be treated with dignity and respect.

The media sometimes portrays young people as beautiful, glamorous and capable, and others as rebellious, unreliable, dissolute and perhaps even criminal, while older people are more often portrayed as conservative, crotchety, helpless and vulnerable. These stereotypes inevitably affect attitudes and expectations of both young and old.

### Age Neutral Terminology

Being old in British society carries connotations of being worn out and of little further use. It is even used as a term of abuse, albeit generally unintentionally. For example the following terms may offend some people:

- old fool
- old codger
- old dear
- geriatric
- old bird
- old biddy
- Just like an old woman.

Clearly we should not make assumptions about the value of people based on their age. Where it is necessary to make reference to age, it is better to use neutral terms such as 'older people' when referring to people.

For example:

- services for older people
- elderly relatives
- older workers
- Elders (this term is often used amongst Minority Ethnic communities).

The terminology used is often down to individual/organisational preference. Some people for example, including service providers, much prefer to use "older people" as opposed to "elderly", but of course others have different views, so, if you can, check first.

Just as language evolves, so do social formalities. Addressing older people by their forename before being invited to do so may run counter to the social norms with which they grew up and so should be avoided.

Equally 'youth' has connotations of inexperience, impetuosity, and unreliability or even dishonesty and addressing someone as 'boy' or 'girl' or referring to the 'new boy/girl' may cause offence. Again if it is necessary to make reference to a person's age it is better to use the neutral 'young people' rather than terms such as:

- child
- kid
- youth
- Youngster.

## Tackling Terminology Relating to Religion

Not everyone defines his or her identity in terms of a religion, but all human beings have beliefs and values. The accurate use of language in these aspects of human experience is one way of demonstrating respect for the beliefs of others. The principles of inclusion need to govern our speech if we are to promote a sense of well being for all, regardless of their personal decisions about religion.

It is a simple but important mark of respect for others if we use language that is appropriate to them, "belief neutral language". For example, to ask a Jewish or Muslim person their Christian name makes no sense, but is also highly disrespectful of their beliefs. The use of the terms 'forename' or 'first name' prevents any misunderstanding and acknowledges that people have different beliefs.

Naming systems can be difficult to follow and comply with, unless you are an expert in this area. For example, in South Asia some people may be referred to by their surname first or their clan name, rather than the left to right approach used in the west. So, Mohammed Yasin Choudhury will never be called Mohammed by his fellow countrymen/compatriots, but Yasin, and officially will be referred to as Choudhury Yasin to recognise his class/social group. In the west however, he may well be called Mohammed first.

Some generalisations can be made about names belonging to certain religions. It is highly likely, for example, that someone who has the name Patel is of Hindu religion and someone with the name Singh is of Sikh religion. However, due to inter-mixing /cross cultural heritage, the name is not a guaranteed way of deducing a person's faith or country of origin.

'Going to Church' is a specifically Christian practice. Members of other faith communities may use a particular place of worship; for example, the communal place of worship for Jews is the synagogue, for Muslims it is the mosque. However, many may practise their faith individually or with other people in other places, including their own homes.

There is much diversity within all the religious denominations and it is impossible to assume that all members of a faith community hold similar views or practise in the same way. A good rule of thumb is to think always of 'some', rather than "all", members of a particular faith group.

It is important to avoid stereotyping and making assumptions. For example, just as some may describe themselves as Christian on official forms, but not be active in a worshipping community, so some Jews may not be observant within the synagogue or in the home. Not all Arabs are Muslims, in the same way that not all British are Christians.

Further information that may be of use can be found on the following websites:

[www.bbc.co.uk/religion](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion)

[www.interfaith.org.uk](http://www.interfaith.org.uk)

[www.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/customs/holidays.html#calendar](http://www.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/customs/holidays.html#calendar).