

Taboo words, disability and marginalized communities

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The Palgrave Handbook of Disability and Communication

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Flinders University and U.K. researchers have analyzed the use of disability-related taboo words to better understand how certain terms are used in the community and shed light on their negative and positive impact on people with disabilities.

The use of language is often at the frontline of efforts to promote wider community acceptance for [disabled people](#), with the boundaries of appropriate language changing quickly in the digital age thanks to the widespread use of social media.

Dedicating a chapter on "Disability and the Power of Taboo Words" in a new edition of [The Palgrave Handbook of Disability and Communication](#), Professor Joanne Arciuli and co-author Professor Tom Shakespeare (U.K.) have examined why certain taboo words continue to be used in the community in a positive way and also looked at the grassroots campaigns trying to raise awareness and discourage people from using other hurtful words.

Their chapter explains why some advocates and disabled people choose to claim these taboo words in favor of self-empowerment while others want some words to disappear from the everyday vocabulary to reduce stigma.

In the U.K., a 2016 Ofcom study asked 248 people about taboo words to determine which terms are the most offensive. The Ofcom study suggested that mental health and disability-related taboo words could be categorized based on their level of offensiveness.

This disparity in acceptable language between countries like the U.K. and the U.S. clearly highlights varying [social attitudes](#) in different parts of the world.

Most recently, the twitter hashtag #CripTheVote was positively used by disability advocates in the U.S. to highlight issues which affect people with disabilities during election campaigns.

"There is a cycle where words are devised in relation to people with a disability which may, in turn, become deployed as insults. This suggests that the problem lies with social attitude towards the underlying condition, rather than the particular word used to label that condition," says lead author Professor Joanne Arciuli in the College of Nursing and Health Sciences.

Professor Arciuli says the current scientific evidence suggests that the brain may deal with taboo words differently from regular words so they resonate powerfully, either positively or negatively.

"Language changes and taboos change too. Historically, many people with disabilities have been ignored, mistreated, or disrespected. We are still working towards the prospect of inclusion that is represented for many by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and terminology is often the frontline of efforts to promote widespread acceptance," says Professor Arciuli.

"The boundaries of what is acceptable, what is hurtful, radical, and what is shameful is changing fast. People with disabilities remain outsiders in many communities. The key point from our chapter in this book is to educate people away from negative attitudes toward all differences, including disability, and to promote inclusion, so that there are no outsiders."

Professor Tom Shakespeare, a co-author of this chapter on taboo words, writes in the chapter that he has restricted growth (short stature) and has experienced many of the insulting words about dwarfism.

"You could say that what's hurtful is the attitude that underlies them, rather than the words themselves. However, it's through words that you become aware of others' attitudes," says Professor Shakespeare.

The article's authors conclude that empowering disabled people through [community participation](#) and employment, including in influential and prominent roles, encourages understanding and respect and can be a positive step towards a more inclusive society.

Provided by Flinders University

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