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Beyond Ramps

The Language of Ableism

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In Canada, approximately 3.8 million people (or 13.7% of the adult population) define themselves as having a disability.¹ “Disability” refers to a very broad and diverse range of experiences, including physical, mental and emotional differences that are both visible and non-visible.

Traditionally and typically, disability is viewed through the lens of *limitation*, a condition that restricts a person’s movement or senses and acts as a disadvantage or handicap.² Disability is construed as a physical “defect” or “flaw” that a person possesses and that must be controlled or fixed, rather than a uniqueness that should be respected, valued and celebrated.

When we speak of injustice in our society, ableism – any form of prejudice, discrimination or social exclusion of people with disabilities – is rarely addressed, except in terms of physical accessibility, such as ramps. Yet, ableism goes beyond structural changes. It has many invisible threads throughout our culture and, as the definition demonstrates, it is rooted in the language we use and the attitudes we hold. Words are never harmless or neutral. They are often used to perpetuate and justify violence, to limit and belittle others, to take away someone’s power.

A very common and obvious example is the use of the word “retarded.” There are many other descriptors that are also thrown around casually, such as “lame,” “crazy” and “insane.” We may view these as benign, but they in fact represent a violent history of oppression and institutionalization of people with disabilities.

In our culture, a person with a disability tends to be placed within the duality of someone who is either to be pitied or to be viewed as heroic or brave. Both options are patronizing, taking away individuals’ right to define *themselves*. It also marks “disability” as something negative and unwanted.

When able-bodied people use words such as *suffer*, *poor thing* or *courageous battle* in reference to a person with a disability, they are knowingly or unknowingly belittling or being ableist. The same is true when they talk down to people in wheelchairs, infantilize people with intellectual disabilities by speaking to them in childish tones and calling them “cute” or continue to tell “inspiring” stories of people overcoming their disabilities and becoming “normal.”

“Normal” is the most ableist word of them all. It excludes people, erases realities, silences voices and strips away human rights. Questions we must ask ourselves are, “Who gets to define ‘normal’ anyway?” and “How can we redefine it?” We must choose our words consciously. We must be aware of their power to harm. Ramps are very important in the fight for disability rights, as they help to provide access, but they do not necessarily guarantee inclusion. For people with disabilities and their families, how we communicate with and about them is just as essential for the achievement of respect, dignity and inclusion in our cultural imagination in Canada. ◀

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¹ Statistics Canada, “Disability in Canada: Initial Findings from the Canadian Survey on Disability,” *Canadian Survey on Disability, 2012*, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 89-654-X (December 2013), accessed January 7, 2014, <http://bit.ly/INfcN6>.

² *Oxford Dictionaries*, for example, define disability as “a physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities” (see *Oxford Dictionaries* online: <http://bit.ly/1joPECC>). *Merriam-Webster* dictionary frames its definition in a similar manner: “a condition (such as an illness or an injury) that damages or limits a person’s physical or mental abilities” (see *Merriam-Webster* online: <http://bit.ly/1akEbUz>).



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