

Diversity Activities

The Power of Language

Objectives

To increase awareness of the words that are chosen to describe people and the effects these words can have.

Time

20 minutes

Materials

“Power of Language” handout

Instructions

1. Language is powerful. It reflects, reinforces, and shapes our perceptions of people. What we call ourselves and what we wish to be called by others is very important to us and to how we are perceived by others.
2. Divide participants into groups of three or four. Ask them to complete the following statements and share them with their group:
 - I hate being called...
 - I prefer to be called...
3. After about ten minutes, distribute the Power of Language handout.
4. Ask participants to review the list for a few minutes.
5. Ask the discussion questions.
6. Close with a review of the background information.

For Discussion

1. How do the terms in the first column differ from those in the second column?
2. How do these terms affect the people they refer to?
3. How do they affect the people who use them?

Background

Historically, the group with the most power has been the one to name things and people. Part of the empowerment of marginalized groups is the demand to name itself.

To outsiders, group names can be confusing because they seem to change rapidly. How are we supposed to know what terms to use? Why bother learning the preferred term when it will probably change again?

Continued...

There is no way we can always get it right. People within groups may even disagree among themselves about their preferred name. As long as we respect the person and make a good faith effort to call people what they wish to be called, we should not be anxious about getting it “exactly right.”

The Power of Language

It matters what we call ourselves and others. Compare the images and feelings evoked by the terms in column one with those evoked by the terms in column two. How do they differ? Can you think of other terms to add to each column?

I.	II.
AIDS victim/innocent victim of AIDS	Person with AIDS
Cerebral-palsied/spastic/spaz	Person with cerebral palsy/person with a seizure disorder
Crazy/insane	Mentally/emotionally disabled
Deaf and dumb/deaf mute	Deaf
Disabled entrance	Accessible entrance
Dying from AIDS	Living with AIDS
Fag/faggot	Gay man
Gimp/lame	mobility impaired
Girl	Woman
Handicapped rooms	Accessible rooms
Homo	Gay/lesbian/bisexual
Hunchback	Person with spinal curvature
Incest victim	Incest survivor
Midget/shrimp	Short-statured person
Non-White	Person of color
Oriental	Asian/Asian American
Retard	Developmentally disabled/mentally retarded/mentally disabled
Wheelchair bound/wheelchair confined	Uses a wheelchair/wheelchair user
Wetback	Mexican/Mexican American