Perspectives on Person-First Language: A Focus on College Students

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Abstract

Many people believe supportive environments inclusive of all populations are of utmost importance. However, a concern centers on the language used to refer to individuals with disabilities, as some support person-first language, and others oppose this practice that became more popular in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Person-first language is the practice of referring to a person before their disability as a form of respect and recognizing them as a person-first and foremost, positioning their disability as secondary. This study of university students gathered the perceptions, awareness levels, and use of person-first language across the university campus environment. Specifically, university students shared the familiarity level and exposure to person-first language, as well as the level of support or opposition of utilizing person-first language. Five hundred ninety five students with a wide variety of academic programs ranked their awareness of person-first language as very familiar (43%) and the university classroom as the most common source of exposure to person-first concepts (45%). Participants rated person-first language as extremely valuable (40%), with some students having no knowledge of the concept (28%), as well as ranking person-first language as having limited or no value (9%). While many study respondents supported person-first language, the majority of those opposed to this concept fell in the age range of 20 years old or younger. Factors influencing the use of person-first language based on age, gender, and academic discipline, including encouragement or opposition of person-first language, are highlighted in detail.

Keywords: person-first language, people-first language, disabilities, university climate

Spoken and written languages are the primary means of communication in today's society. Through language, humans are able to communicate thoughts and feelings, as well as understand the perspectives of others. Therefore, it is important the language used in society accurately represents all people, including those with disabilities. One's language may have significant impacts upon those with disabilities and how they are portrayed. "Language empowers, language is instrumental in expressing feelings, perceptions, and attitudes" (Myers, Lindburg, & Nied, 2013, p. 86). One's emotions and feelings are often transmitted through language, therefore influencing the perceptions of others with regard to their value and status. Through observation of language, the potential to understand one's wants, needs, and opinions thrive.

The purpose of this study was to recognize the perspectives, awareness levels, and use of person-first language of undergraduate and graduate students on a university campus. Utilizing person-first language is the method of acknowledging a person in spoken and written language, and addressing their disability as secondary (Jensen et al., 2013). Cohen and Avanzino (2010) stated, "language that has been used to describe people with disability is traditionally disempowering and oppressive" (p. 299). Therefore, the intent of person-first language is to give the person with a disability respect and power beyond their disability (Halmari, 2011).

Literature Review

The discussion on language regarding disabilities, especially person-first language, is relevant to all people, with or without disabilities, because the odds of spending at least part of anyone's lifetime with a

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disability are 100% (Titchkosky, 2001). Additionally, Abramo (2012) argued that disability advocates encourage the use of people-first language and "prefer to use what they call a social model of disability, which defines disability not as a limitation of the body or mind but as a social position" (p. 40). Jensen et al. (2013) included "language that does not place the person-first creates a barrier and sets distance between the [caregiver] and the individuals engaged in care, reinforcing the outdated mentality of 'us versus them'" (p. 149).

Jensen et al. (2013) viewed language as a vehicle for change. In their study, the researchers described the positive impact the adoption of person-first language had on the recovery processes of patients. Nurses were urged to adopt person-first language when working with patients. Ultimately, the nurses found person-first language supported strides in a patient's recovery. They "caution those in health care to reject stigmatizing language and adopt the language of inclusion in the quest to develop the kind of communities in which we all wish to live" (p. 148). Furthermore, using person-first language in health care and in everyday use may have significant impacts of the mental state of individuals with disabilities. Using labels contributes to negative stereotypes and may devalue the person one attempts to describe. The greatest barrier of full integration of those with disabilities into society is the negative perceptions those without disabilities have of those impacted by disability (Cohen & Avanzino, 2010).

Person-first language is stated clearly into laws with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997. The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps is credited with leading the endorsement of person-first language shortly after ADA was passed (Jensen et al., 2013). Halmari (2011) stated that the name changes of government and state agencies in the United States are reflections of a more compassionate world, or a more sentimental view of humanity. For example, "The President's Committee on Mental Retardation" was renamed "The President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities" in July 2013 when President Bush signed an Executive Order (Halmari, 2011). Additionally, some scholarly journals require authors to use person-first language exclusively in their manuscript submissions (McDermott & Turk, 2014).

A considerable amount of research on the treatment of individuals with disabilities in today's society is focused on language usage. For example, Cohen and Avanzino (2010) reported that adults with physical disabilities have experienced being treated like children by adults without disabilities. Titchkosky (2001) stated it is common for people without disabilities to speak on behalf of what people with disabilities seek, want, or feel. A culture of rejection may be changed through the education of people without disabilities on how to use empowering and inclusive language (Cohen & Avanzino, 2010).

Cohen and Avanzino (2010) attempted to explain some of the powerful attitudinal barriers through a term, "disability spread" (p. 275), which explains the phenomenon of when a "nondisabled person's assumption that one's disability is the defining characteristic of the individual and may 'spread' to other areas of the body". For example, if a person uses a wheelchair, an individual who is not impacted by disability may assume that the person using the wheelchair also has a cognitive impairment, and that may not be the case at all. Jensen et al. (2013) stated that "reducing stigma one word at a time through the use of person-first language is a place to start" (p. 143) in changing the perceptions and attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Many experts have stated that person-first language is an important first step in breaking down barriers in society.

Halmari (2011) asserted, "Anyone who believes that we have finally arrived at the perfect terminology will be proven wrong by history. I am sure that at some future point we will find the phrase 'intellectual and developmental disabilities' to be inadequate and demeaning" (p. 839). The author explained that using person-first language is currently the most politically correct approach, as it is the most well intentioned and widely accepted approach. However, person-first language may not be the permanent language choice, and therefore, society must be open to change. She goes on to state that "attitudes towards disadvantaged groups will change if language is reformed" (p. 829). Jensen et al. (2013) noted "ultimately, the hope is that person-first language will form the foundation for recovery-oriented practice and enhanced collaborative treatment environments that foster respect, human dignity, and hope" (p. 150).

The goal of person-first language is to reduce or eliminate the attitudinal barriers in society that create obstacles for those impacted by disability (Jensen et al., 2013). When individuals with disabilities are assimilating into an organization, it is important that they are seen as person-first, and not just a disability so they can become integrated into the organization and society as a whole (Cohen & Avanzino, 2010). Jensen et al. (2013) stated that, "the natural evolution of person-first language serves to carry on the goal of ending discrimination by altering the way we refer to and talk about people with disabilities verbally and in

writing" (p. 147). To reach this goal, however, experts note that society must be educated on the proper language use. A study of teacher-librarians' knowledge of supporting students with disabilities revealed that even though many teacher-librarians were familiar with the concept of person-first language, they did not place it at a high value in their work (Myhill, Hill, Link, Small, & Bunch, 2012).

Many organizations support the use of person-first language, deeming it to be beneficial and encourage its continued use. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the largest international professional organization dedicated to improving educational outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities, students with disabilities, and/or the gifted, continues to support the use of person-first language. Multiple resources are offered for CEC professional members, including a recent "Tool of the Week" identified as Remember: Person-First!, a document listing suggested phrases to "Say…" and "Do Not Say…" to support person-first language usage (CEC, 2016).

While a significant amount of support for using person-first language exists, some have differing opinions and would prefer not to use this terminology. For example, Titchkosky (2001) presented many opinions in opposition of person-first language. She argued that a person with a disability is just a person with a disability and by utilizing such a complex language style; one is further othering individuals with disabilities. Titchkosky discussed how in an ableist-centered society, "person-first ensures that some clear and certain image of bodily limitation or sensorial lack is re-inscribed only on 'them'" (p. 130). In other words, if the world was dis-ableist, would each person's disability be relevant?

One of the Titchkosky's (2001) main arguments stated that person-first language makes the claim of "resemblance of normalcy can be attained if all people and institutions emphasize, over and over again, that disabled people are indeed 'people'" (p. 134). Attempts to ensure that people with disabilities are treated as simply people cause their disabilities to be viewed as a negative.

> People-first language supports accounting procedures where one can be counted as a 'person with a disability' without having any self-understanding as such. Thus, "people with disabilities" are made persons first, i.e., persons who happen to have a measurable condition of limitation or lack, which is regarded as having nothing to do with being a "person." (p. 129)

Halmari (2011) criticized person-first language due to its "wordy, awkward, sentence structure" that they feel calls more attention to the disability (p. 828). The researcher explained that the proper grammatical structure of person-first language is "head N + PP (PP starting with the preposition with), head N + relative clause (relative clause starting with who), or head N + participial (people having)" (p. 830). For example, one would say a student (noun) with autism (past participle). In other words, the noun or "person" is always stated first. Halmari stated that although person-first language is, "a reflection of humane ideals, it is simultaneously based on linguistically circular reasoning (or lack of it)" (p. 838). She furthers her argument by explaining that person-first language is "based on the idea that post-modification automatically takes the emphasis away from the disability" (p. 839). According to the functional sentence perspective, new information is presented at the end of a sentence and by placing the disability at the end of a sentence, "shines extra light on what it seeks to conceal" (p. 839).

Other authors highlight another perspective regarding the language utilized. For example, Dunn and Andrews (2015) suggested the concept of utilizing identity-first language in tandem with person-first language frameworks. The intent of this approach was to promote respect and dignity for all people. Individuals impacted by disability are able to "claim" their disability status as a fact and highlight this fact as a point of pride when using the identity-first approach. Through this mindset, terms such as "disabled person" are referred to as identify-first and are preferred by some individuals impacted by disability, as well as segments of the general public.

Ladau (2015) also supported the use of identity-first language over person-first language as an individual impacted by disability. This author clearly outlined her disability as a source of pride, and describes it as a fact of life and a state of being. She pronounced the use of person-first language as insinuating that disability is a derogatory or negative term to use in describing individuals. Ladau (2015) asserted that person-first language is used and supported primarily by those that are non-disabled, while identity-first terminology is preferred by many people that have been impacted by disability.

Collier (2012) referred to person-first language as a structural euphemism. This editor stated that language is used to supposedly support those impacted by disabilities, however any positive results will be temporary and short termed. Collier was also opposed to person-first language because it conflicts with strong writing guidelines. Through the inclusion of extra words in the description of individuals im-

pacted by disability, the strength of the statement and writing are diminished.

Methods

This manuscript summarizes the results of a study centered on gathering the perspectives of 595 undergraduate and graduate university students from a mid-size Midwestern university in the United States. Data regarding student demographics including age, gender, class standing, race, and academic college were reported by study respondents. Students reported their level of exposure to person-first language, as well as their awareness level and use of the term. In addition, respondents shared their agreement or opposition to the concept of person-first language.

Participants

Five hundred ninety five university students participated in this study as they completed an online survey gathering perceptions and experiences regarding person-first language. More females shared their perspectives, as 482 responded (81.01%), as compared to 109 males (18.32%), and four (0.67%) of the respondents chose not to disclose their gender. With regard to age, nearly half of the respondents were 20 years old or younger, as 292 reported their thoughts (49.08%). Two hundred forty five individuals were between the ages of 21 and 25 years (41.18%). The ages ranged from under 20 years to 60 years of age, with only 9.74% of respondents being 26 years and older.

Of the total 595 university students that completed this survey, 520 were undergraduate students (87.39%) and 75 were enrolled at the university as graduate students (12.61%). Finally, respondents chose between seven different academic colleges to identify their plan of study at the university. Most commonly, students were associated with the College of Education and Human Services, as 191 students enrolled or had plans to sign a major in these fields (32.1%). The college that the fewest respondents associated with was the College of Medicine with 14 respondents (2.35%). The remaining colleges were represented consistently, with between 10.08% to 16.98% of the survey respondents from each academic discipline from the Colleges of Science and Technology, Health Professions, Humanities, Social & Behavioral Sciences, Business Administration, as well as Communication and Fine Arts.

With regard to ethnicity, the 595 respondents in this study self-identified as primarily of White or Caucasian descent with 507 student responses (85.21%). Other ethnicities represented in the data were 26 respondents of Asian descent (4.36%), 17 individuals self-identified as Black/African American (2.86%), 12 as Hispanic/Latino (2.02%), 12 as Biracial (2.02%), 10 as Middle Eastern (1.68%), and six as Native American/Pacific Islander (1.01%). Additionally, five students preferred not to answer this question (.84%).

Procedure

Based on existing research and potential assessment tools focused on person-first language, an original pilot survey was developed by the authors. The survey was first distributed to students enrolled in two University Program courses. The survey was piloted by approximately 80 university students who provided feedback on the initial survey. The final survey incorporated content and wording feedback from the pilot group. The online survey was distributed to graduate and undergraduate students via the online survey tool, SurveyMonkey. The link to the survey was emailed to the student population through the campus listserv, *Student News Announcements* and remained active for approximately six weeks. Through approval by the Office of Student Activities and Involvement, every student on campus was invited to participate via email. Prior to distribution, the study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. In addition, recruitment flyers were posted throughout the university campus in common areas such as the University Center and residence halls.

The students self-identified their interest in completing this survey, and were able to complete the survey at their leisure and be as detailed or general as they desired. Respondents did not receive any compensation or course credit for participation in this study. The survey consisted of six demographic questions including gender, age, ethnicity, class standing, number of college semesters completed, and college of study. Demographics were followed by opportunities for student respondents to rate their level of knowledge about the field of special education from no knowledge to extensive knowledge. University students were then asked about their level of familiarity of person-first language, ranging from unfamiliar to very familiar. The next question provided subjects with eight options to select including statements such as, *I have a disability*, and *Someone in my immediate family has a disability,* followed by options of *Someone in my extended family has a disability, A close friend of mine has a disability, An acquaintance of mine has a disability, A classmate or coworker of mine has a disability, I have met someone with a disability,* and *I do not know anyone with a disability.*

Next, participants were asked to select their level of interaction with individuals impacted by disability, ranging from on a *daily basis, regularly, rarely,* or *never*. Students that already had an awareness of person-first language were asked how they learned details about this concept. Seven options for answers included in *elementary, middle,* or *high school classroom settings, interactions in the college classroom setting, work settings, professional development, personal friends and family, independent research,* or *other.* University students were then asked about their perceptions of the value of person-first language with choices of *none, limited, moderate, valuable,* and *extremely valuable*; how often they used person-first language, including *never, rarely, sometimes, often,* and *always;* and if they had any additional open ended comments or thoughts to share with the researchers regarding person-first language.

Data Analysis

This study employed techniques to analyze both the qualitative and quantitative data collected from university students. After survey collection was complete, the researchers analyzed the quantitative data utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to explore the first 14 questions on the survey. The original number of university students that attempted the survey was 675; however, 80 people did not complete the entire survey. A detailed analysis of the data from 595 target surveys took place, including descriptive statistics and percentages utilizing a comparative analysis.

The open-ended question responses that comprised the qualitative data were organized by theme and summarized. The authors began the process of coding the qualitative data by independently reading all comments related to their perceptions, experiences, and use of person-first language among various contexts. The process of memoing assisted with the data analysis. The next step of analysis included dividing the open-ended responses into multiple themes based on the frequency of each response.

Results

As stated previously, 520 undergraduates and 75 graduate students participated in this study. Nine percent of the graduate students felt they had extensive academic and practical knowledge of special education, while 31% reported an adequate level of knowledge in this area, 54% had a minimal level of knowledge, and 6% had no knowledge of academic and practical knowledge of special education. Ten percent of undergraduates felt they had extensive academic and practical knowledge of special education, while 36% reported adequate level of knowledge, 43% minimal level of knowledge, and 11% had no knowledge in this area. To the best of their knowledge, 25% of study respondents interacted with one or more people who have a disability on a daily basis, 59% have interacted with individuals with disabilities in the past, 15% interact with an individual with a disability rarely, and two respondents shared they never interacted with anyone with a disability. Additionally, 31% of the graduate students participating in the study reported having no knowledge of person-first language prior to completing this survey, as opposed to 27% of undergraduates. Furthermore, 37% of the graduate students who were familiar with person-first language prior to taking the survey found it extremely valuable, as did 41% of the undergraduates.

The respondents who felt they had no or minimal knowledge in the practical and academic knowledge of special education was 35.98% in the disciplines of education and human services, 53.93% in health professions, 61.84% in humanities and social and behavioral sciences, 64.29% in medicine, 66.67% in communication and fine arts, 71.29% in science and technology, and 71.67% in business administration. On the contrary, respondents who felt they had extensive knowledge in practical and academic knowledge in special education reported their levels at 0% in the science and technology, 1.75% in communications and fine arts, 3.95% in humanities, social and behavioral sciences, 6.67% in business administration, 6.74% in health professions, 7.14% in medicine, and 21.16% in education and human services.

Of the respondents exposed to person-first language prior to this survey, those 20 years old or younger primarily learned about person-first language from experiences in their elementary, middle school, or high school educational experiences. For other age groups, the exposure varied among different settings. For example, respondents between the age of 21 and 25 years received the most information about person-first language in the university classroom, those 26 to 30 years old were exposed through their employment, and 31 to 35-year-olds learned about person-first language equitably from their education background, university classroom, and friends and family. Forty-one to 45-year-old respondents also gathered knowledge about person-first language equally among the university classroom, employment background, professional development opportunities, as well as friends and family. Professional development was the most common informant for those 46-50 years old, and friends and family provided insight for those respondents ranging in age from 51

to 55 years old. Participants in the study older than 56 did not have knowledge of person-first language prior to this study.

Of the students who had been previously exposed to person-first language, the portion who never or rarely used person-first language reported at 2.63% form disciplines in humanities, social, and behavioral sciences, 2.65% in education and human services, 7.14% in medicine, 10% in business administration, 10.52% in communication and fine arts, 12.36% in health professions, and 13.86% in science and technology. Of those who had been previously exposed to person-first language, the portion who often or always used person-first language are as follows: 20% in business administration, 23.6% in health professions, 26.73% in science and technology, 36.85% in communication and fine arts, 44.73% in humanities, social, and behavioral sciences, 50% in medicine, and 72.31% in education and human services.

With regard to those who felt person-first language has limited or no value, the students from science and technology (19.3%) and medicine (21.43%) rated this concept as having the lowest rates of limited or no value. Additionally, students from the academic disciplines of health professions (44.32%) and education and human services (61.08%) are the two disciplines that rated person-first language with the highest level of value.

The goal of this study was to assess the perspectives, use, and awareness levels of person-first language on the university campus. Overall, 43% of the respondents that completed this survey were very familiar with person-first language prior to taking this survey. Additionally, of all the respondents, 39.58% felt that person-first language was extremely valuable. Overall, the data revealed that 48.14% of respondents often or always use person-first language when interacting with or speaking about people with disabilities. Based on this data, we can conclude that a large portion of the campus population is familiar with the concept of person-first language and believes that it has extreme value. Of all the respondents, 28.81% were unfamiliar with the concept of person-first language. These numbers revealed a higher knowledge level than anticipated prior to this study.

It was predicted that students in fields of education and human services would have increased awareness levels and place a higher value on person-first language. The data strongly confirmed this prediction as 66.84% of respondents from these academic disciplines answered that they were very familiar with the concept of person-first language. This is over 10% higher than the students from health professions in which 55.06% answered that they were very familiar. Both of these are significantly higher than the average portion of respondents (19.99%) from the other universities who answered that they were very familiar. This aligns with what is to be expected, as the most common careers that may use person-first language are often education, human services, and health professions.

Another prediction centered on many of the respondents would be exposed to person-first language in a university classroom. The results confirmed this as 44.63% of the respondents answered that they had been first exposed to the concept in interactions in a university classroom setting. The next two common responses were interactions in an elementary, middle, or high school classroom setting (36.29%) and personal friends and family (36.12%). Several respondents who selected other as a response also answered that they had been exposed to person-first language through other programs on campus such as Residence Life, Alternative Breaks, Leadership Safari, and the David Garcia Project. These results display that the university is making positive strides in heightening the awareness of person-first language on campus.

Themes

Examining the data for details with potential to highlight the perceptions of university students of their support or opposition of person-first language resulted in several different themes. Perspectives and insights were divided into four broad themes to describe the view of university students regarding the use of person-first language. These themes include opposition to person-first language, support of person-first language, expansion of person-first language to more broad perspectives, and individualization of language to support individuals with disabilities.

Theme 1: Opposition to person-first language. Approximately 10% of the university students participating in this study presented strong views against the use of person-first language. In the majority of cases, the viewpoints against person-first language were from university students 20 years old or younger. In some cases, their stance against person-first language was a result of knowing individuals with specific disabilities that did not want to be referred to using person-first language. For example, one participant shared, "I know many Deaf people who take pride in what others would consider a disability… So person-first would not be applicable…Actually should definitely not be used in such a situation." Another respondent shared his or her own person journey, "while I have bipolar disorder, person-first language doesn't mean too much to me. It doesn't bother me to be identified as the bipolar guy or anything similar – it's just who I am."

Other examples of concerns centered on the use of grammar in speaking or writing. For example, some believe person-first language requires extra words that are not necessary. One participant responded by explaining, "I feel as though it almost puts more emphasis on the disability as instead of using just one adjective (autistic) the sentence now has [two] words describing the person (with autism)." Another student shared frustration through his/her response, "that's idiotic. It is changing the way the English language is constructed because people are too sensitive. You would not say a truck that is big and red; you would say a big, red truck. There is no need to be so overly PC that you restructure an entire language's grammar." One study participant also described impact on grammar as, "I feel it causes one to use extraneous words when making a sentence that make it sound less grammatically correct, just to be politically correct. Also, I feel as though it almost puts more emphasis on the disability instead of using just one adjective (autistic), the sentence now has two words describing the person (with autism)."

Theme 2: Support of person-first language. Approximately 62% of respondents held firm opinions in support of the use of person-first language in all environments. Respondents aged 26 years old and younger offered words of support regarding the use of person-first language. For example, one respondent stated, "inclusive language and person-first language in particular, are so essential in creating a more accepting, positive environment for all people." Other respondents shared, "value the person-first, not the perceived limitations," and "all communication can be lost if someone in the conversation gets hurt." Another person shared their level of frustration about not using person-first language when discussing individuals, "we never say 'broken-leg Sue.' Why on earth we would say 'wheelchair bound' or 'autistic boy' baffles me!"

Other examples of supportive comments included ideas to support long-term usage of person-first language. For example, "we need to change the language in order to change the perceptions and assumptions that people make about people who have disabilities. Too much of our thought processes are automatic. Changing the language will over time change the thought processes, empathy, [and] acceptance levels." Other respondents felt that disability is not a person's most important characteristic and commented more generally, "it is important for a person not to be identified by his/her disability. It does not and should not define them." Yet another respondent noted, "I believe person-first language is very valuable because people are likely to encounter a person with a disability at some point if they haven't already and people should understand this so they don't say something that may offend someone else." Additionally, "I strongly believe that individuals need to be respected and given equal treatment no matter any differences," stated another respondent in support of person-first language. Some individuals shared perspectives based on their personal experiences. For example, one person shared, "Having a friend who is a Paralympian, it was clear that he was an athlete in a wheelchair – athlete first, then wheelchair. It just makes sense."

Theme 3: Expansion of person-first language to more broad perspectives. Several study respondents made comments centered on expanding the use of person-first language beyond the field of disability studies, and into other areas such as race, medical settings, and learning environments. Most of the individuals making these suggestions range in age from 26-30 years. For example, one person shared, "we could think about this when it comes to race too. We always say white person or black person, not person of African American descent." Another respondent shared, "person-first language goes beyond application to persons with disabilities. It applies to any time you describe a person: a person with asthma or hypertension, or any other disease in the medical setting, describing people and their socio-economic status, employment status, gender, sexual preference, race, etc. I have confronted professors who discuss research respondents (e.g., dyslexic) and asked them to use the phrase people with dyslexia instead and to remember person-first language when writing their own research papers." Additionally, another example is "I think it's very, very important. I think it is important not just for disabilities, but other areas too. Speaking about people with varying sexual orientations and gender identities."

Theme 4: Individualization of language to support individuals with disabilities. The concept of using language that is individualized and specific towards each person and situation emerged as a theme among the study responses. These comments were provided by students in the age range of 21-25 and shared a consistent message of individualization. For example, one respondent wrote: "from the viewpoint of someone who is within the disabled community, it ALWAYS depends on the person. As a default, you should never use person-first. Many disabled people find it offensive because of intricate experiences with ableism prevalent in society." Another study participant reported, "I haven't thought much about using person-first language because I usually refer to people with disabilities by their name."

Discussion

As more students with disabilities are likely to enroll in higher education, and more conversations are taking place across university campuses regarding disability, increasing disability awareness and education is imperative. Results of the study discussed in this manuscript provide information useful for thinking about perceptions of undergraduate and graduate university students about person-first language, as well as strategies that may assist those in university environments to increase knowledge and experiences.

Several of the findings highlighted throughout this study align with previous research in the field of person-first language exploration. Jensen et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of respect when referring to individuals with disabilities, as well as the need to address attitudinal barriers. Similarly, respondents of this current study echoed a focus on respect. As one respondent stated, "Person-first language is a common courtesy and an easy way to show respect for persons with disabilities." Another response mirrors this viewpoint,

> Recognizing the humanity of every individual you meet is incredibly important. Labels and identities are complex and shape so much of our daily experiences and perceptions. By using person-first language, you are promoting an inclusive environment that acknowledges differences, but does not define people by them."

Discussing strategies that may increase the opportunities for university students to expand their knowledge of topics centered on disability awareness in a respectful and informative fashion have the potential to positively influence their approaches as they transition out of the university environment into the professional world and larger society. Cohen and Avanzino (2012) reported that the potential for individuals with disabilities to become incorporated into organizations and society is often dependent on language usage and perceptions. Themes aligning with this approach throughout the current study focus on university students being more aware of the university culture and continue positive and respectful practices as they transition beyond the university setting, into future careers.

Those opposed to the use of person-first language reported similar responses within the university setting, as compared to criticism of person-first language by Halmarti (2011), pointing out the awkward structure of this approach. As one respondent shared, "I think you're just being picky on wording when it comes down to it. Most people don't mean it as offensive." Another individual from the university setting described the use of person-first language as "idiotic." These viewpoints also align with Titchkosky (2001) that argued against the use of person-first language in our society.

Examining the resources, opportunities for support, and perceptions similar to those discussed above is an important next step in working to support students with disabilities across the university setting and beyond. Increased awareness and opportunities to exchange ideas of the most appropriate language to discuss or address individuals with disabilities, based on individual preferences are important strategies to consider, "I would never speak with someone without knowing what they are okay being called. I would ask or get to know them enough to ask what offends them."

Limitations

Several factors contributed to the limitations of this study. First, 595 university students participated in this project, which is significantly lower than the number of university students attending this particular mid-size Midwestern University. Other perceptions and awareness levels of person-first language may not be represented in the data collected and therefore conclusions cannot be drawn about the perceptions and awareness level of person-first language of the student body as a whole, but only about the survey respondents.

The study was also limited in the fact that many of the demographics of the population represented one demographic much more heavily than the others. For example, 81.01% of the survey respondents were female, whereas only 56.38% of university students are female across the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Additionally, 507 or 85.21% of students self-identified as White/Caucasian when asked about their ethnicity. This demographic does not represent the 58% of university students identified as White/Caucasian in the United States.

The most common area of study of survey respondents was identified as academic fields of education and human services (32.1%). This may skew the results because students who associate with these disciplines may be more likely to receive instruction and exposure to person-first language through their program of study, therefore they may be more knowledgeable than students who associate with other disciplines. Specifically, only 2.35% of the survey respondents identified medicine as their area of study, so the perceptions and awareness levels of

person-first language may not be well represented from this discipline. In order for the data to be more representative, more responses from students in other academic fields are needed.

Directions for Future Research

Throughout this study, several topics arose as possible future areas of in-depth research that would assist in building the knowledge base regarding person-first language. One area centers on the factors that influence the exposure to person-first language students experience on a university campus. In this particular research, extracurricular programs such as Alternative Breaks, Leadership Camp, Leadership Safari, and David Garcia Project were mentioned as experiences in which the respondents learned of person-first language. Perhaps an in-depth analysis may be completed of the success from these programs in order to understand how to best educate students, staff, and faculty in the academic areas of business administration, science, and technology, as these academic domains represented individuals less aware of person-first language. This analysis may be shared with others across campus in order to raise their awareness levels consistency throughout the learning environment.

Additionally, to increase the students' values of person-first language from the colleges that had lower values of person-first language, faculty and staff could discuss person-first language in the classroom setting. The data suggests that students in the academic areas of education, human services, humanities, social and behavioral science, and health professionals have the most knowledge regarding person-first language. Studies facilitated to evaluate the inclusion of person-first language in university program course options could be required for all students across campus as part of their undergraduate program have the possibility of adding vital components to the research base. Although university students may not realize it, they may consistently interact with persons with disabilities in their fields and it is important that each individual is made aware of the concept of person-first language. Exposure to person-first language through modeling, reading materials, assignments, and classroom interactions, has the potential of positively influencing the lives of individuals with disabilities, as well as learning communities as a whole. Perhaps increased awareness levels and familiarity will encourage higher values and respect for utilizing person-first language, therefore individuals impacted by disabilities.

Additional research is necessary to determine how persons with disabilities perceive person-first language. Of the respondents in this study, only 7.39% had a disability. One must recognize that that number may not be accurate, as many individuals may not feel comfortable enough to self-disclose their disability. Of those that did identify as having a disability, 34.09% placed a high value on the use of person-first language. One respondent stated, "I would like to see some data on how the person-first language helps people with disabilities feel included. Do they appreciate it? Do their families' appreciate it? Or is it something people without disabilities decided was important and now it's the 'acceptable' thing?" Further investigation into these topics has the potential to add valuable insights, as discovering answers to questions posed by individuals with disabilities and their advocates contribute additional resources and increases the knowledge base of person-first language. Additionally, further research is also necessary to determine how the concept of person-first language could apply to other social identities such as race or sexual orientation, if applicable.

Conclusion

Based on a comprehensive literature review and analysis of perceptions from 595 university students, it may be concluded that person-first language is the most favorable practice when interacting with or speaking about people with disabilities for these study respondents. As stated previously, one participant summarized their thoughts succinctly, "We never say 'broken-leg Sue.' Why on earth we would say 'wheelchair bound' or 'autistic boy?' baffles me!"

Sharing different views of the person-first language concept often lead to rich discussion, exchange of perceptions, and identification of challenges, as new viewpoints and approaches are examined. Although person-first language was reported as the most appropriate and widely accepted practice in this study, we must recognize the alternate approaches of using identity-first, competency-oriented, other models of language that may emerge. It is imperative to treat each individual in the way he or she prefers to be treated. As one respondent summarized it, "it's all about respect, which everyone deserves."

Several strong components of the person-first language debate have been identified, as well as areas for improvement to increase awareness. Significant suggestions have been made regarding approaches and opportunities to increase awareness about appropriate language with regard to individuals with disabilities. Building heightened knowledge and experiences will benefit not only university students, as well as communities as a whole. Through meaningful

learning opportunities, individuals with disabilities, as well as their friends and advocates, are empowered using ability appropriate language, perhaps leading to perceptions that are supportive and more accurate.

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