

Choosing Inclusive Language

Background

Critical Dietetics is one of many health movements committed to furthering health equity through advancing social justice. This necessitates bringing a criticality to the profession's dominant ideologies and actively seeking to hear people whose voices have been marginalised in traditional dietetic discourse.

In this context criticality means bringing to bear a wide range of perspectives and making explicit any normalised assumptions that shape personal beliefs and professional practices. Criticality makes us more aware of why we do what we do. Because it makes visible the values that drive our decisions, it supports best practice by keeping ethics, care and social justice centre stage.

Notes on Language around Weight

Terms such as 'overweight' and 'obesity' are commonly used in nutrition and dietetics to describe weight status. This often happens without any awareness that the routine use of such terms is highly problematic. This section explains why things are not as straightforward as we have typically been taught.

Social movements such as the Disability Rights movement have helped raise awareness of the impact words have in fashioning beliefs and attitudes. A good example is found in the UK charity *Scope* who write on their website:

In 1952, three parents of children with cerebral palsy set up The Spastics Society because no one would educate their children.

The organisation grew and changed to become a household name. But attitudes to disabled people changed as well. The word 'spastic' became a term of abuse. Suddenly, The Spastics Society's name was holding it back.

We wanted to say something positive about disability. In 1994, The Spastics Society became Scope.

So too, Fat Rights activists have alerted us to the ways in which the terms 'obese' and 'overweight' are offensive. It may well be that 'spastic' retains a clinical meaning, but that's beside the point and makes for a rather disingenuous argument. Words - like spastic and obesity - carry meaning and valence in everyday language and can act against inclusion.

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Calling a fat person 'obese' is comparable to calling a disabled person 'handicapped', or a queer woman an 'invert'.

While this might be the first time you have read work that problematises language around weight, the ideas are not new. This gap in the education of health professionals highlights a problem in whose voices count in knowledge-creation. In this case, it is the voices that support the status quo that are dominant in fashioning mainstream dietetic discourse and the voices of Fat Rights activists that are missing. The dominant opinion comes to be seen as the only opinion, or the right opinion, and either we are not made aware that other views exist, or they are dismissed as biased. It is this process of normalising the dominant view that criticality seeks to interrupt to foster a richer, more socially-just learning and practice community. There is a wealth of on-line and printed literature available from Fat Rights activists for anyone wanting to further explore the silence of fat people's experiences in dietetic and other health discourses.

The terms 'obese' 'overweight' 'ideal weight' and 'healthy weight' are redundant in other ways. They make assessments of people's health status according to BMI yet the BMI is a very unreliable indicator of health. These terms thus end up pathologising otherwise healthy people at the same time as erroneously giving a clean bill of health to some people who are unhealthy. It doesn't advance critical thinking for us to keep using them as if they were scientifically meaningful.

So, in keeping with the shift away from using weight as an independent health marker, the fields of Fat Rights, Critical Dietetics (and Health at Every Size® (HAES®)) use the descriptive terms 'fat' and 'thin' instead of medicalised terms such 'overweight', 'obese' and 'ideal weight'.

Thought Police?

As Deborah Cameron says so succinctly, understanding the impact of words doesn't stop us from saying what we want, it just means we can no longer act as if what we say is without consequence. Critiquing words doesn't make them go away! It is still possible to be offensive or exclusionary; the difference is that taking time to think things through gives us a choice in this.

Want to know what to watch out for?

Academic but respectful. Dietitian but intelligent. Fat but fit. Fat but attractive. Fat but smart. What are your responses to these phrases? You may have taken umbrage at the first two, and for good reason. In each case the use of the word 'but' infers that the two terms do not usually coexist: academics are not usually

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respectful, and dietitians are not usually intelligent. Clearly this is untrue, and therefore these are unjust statements to make. So too for the 'fat but ...' statements.

If you've not baulked at reading 'fat but ...' statements before, then this may be an illustration of thinness privilege. Thinness privilege describes the way thin people can expect to go about their business without experiencing routine size-related bias. It refers to the unasked for and unearned advantage those of us who are thin receive at the expense of those of us who are fat. If we are thin we get to take respect for granted and be unaware of fat bias, so we're unlikely to even notice the problem with 'fat but ...' Your response may also be a result of internalised fat bias, irrespective of size. Anyone can incorporate fat bias into their world view and it seems so normal to devalue fat people that we simply don't notice it happening.

Thinking things through

I've found it useful to use analogies to help me really think things through. How does it feel to substitute one type of oppressed group for another, when talking about issues? Does it help to highlight some taken-for-granted oppressions? Douglas Hofstadter did just this in a satirical essay in which he substituted the word 'man' for the word 'white', and the word 'feminist' for the word 'negrists'.

Most of the clamor, as you certainly know by now, revolves around the age-old usage of the noun "white" and words built from it, such as *chairwhite, mailwhite, repairwhite, clergywhite, middlewhite, Frenchwhite, forewhite, whitepower, whiteslaughter, oneupwhiteship, straw white, whitehandle*, and so on. The negrists claim that using the word "white," either on its own or as a component, to talk about *all* the members of the human species is somehow degrading to blacks and reinforces racism. Therefore the libbers propose that we substitute "person" everywhere where "white" now occurs.

The point of this substitution exercise is not to play off one type of bias against another or construct hierarchies of oppression but to use analogy to raise awareness of what gets hidden. Hofstadter's shocking essay highlights the offensiveness of using the term 'whites' as a generic term for all people, and is one reason why I don't use 'guys' as a generic term either. Some decry such attention to language as 'political correctness' but words matter, particularly for those whose identity is not consistent with the generic term or the binary gender options it reinforces.

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The ... movement for so-called 'politically correct' language does not threaten our freedom to speak as we choose ...

It threatens only our freedom to imagine that our linguistic choices are inconsequential, or to suppose that one group has an inalienable right to prescribe them.

Deborah Cameron (1994)

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for Lily O'Hara for her insightful contributions to this Think Paper * which greatly improved readability. Thanks also to Amy Godfrey for her thoughtful feedback on an earlier draft. * Think Paper is a trademarked term and used with permission from Know and Do <http://knowanddo.com>.

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