

# TERMINOLOGY AND THE PSYCHOSOCIAL BURDEN OF BLINDNESS

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## Introduction

Anglo-American debate about the terminology that is used when referring to persons who are registered as blind or partially sighted has remained lively for decades. This is demonstrable in numerous episodes of Disability Correspondent Peter White's BBC Radio 4 programme *In Touch*, as well as in the work of psychologist Donald Kirtley and former National Federation of the Blind (NFB) president Kenneth Jernigan. At the heart of the debate is the inherently erroneous and consequently burdensome nature of the word "blindness". The burden can be described as psychosocial

because it perpetuates prejudice and thus has both psychological and social properties. The paper will expand on this hypothesis in order that more progressive terminology might be considered, that the psychosocial burden of the term "blindness" might be reduced.

### **The Counter Argument**

The counter argument essentially is for terminological appropriation, pertaining to issues of (1) political correctness and (2) person-first terminology. Firstly, disability studies scholar Georgina Kleege appropriates the term 'visually challenged' as a way of 'poking fun' at what she calls the 'current mania to stick a verbal smiley face on any human condition that deviates from the perceived norm' (1999, p.10). From a similar position, the NFB has argued against usage of person-first phrases such as people or persons who are blind, saying that while harmless in occasional and ordinary speech they are totally unacceptable as a form of political correctness

(Jernigan, 1993). Secondly, the euphemism concerning people or persons who are blind is said to be overly defensive, since it implies shame instead of true equality, and portrays "the blind" as touchy and belligerent (Jernigan, 1993). The contention is that since blindness is not a shameful characteristic, a blind person needs to be called a person who is blind no more than, say, an intelligent person needs to be referred to as a person who is intelligent. The problem is (1) that the charge of political correctness is also made by 'those who want to retain the right to be freely abusive' (Valentine, 2002, p.219) and (2) that the aim of person-first terminology is not to emphasise but to reflect that the subject is primarily a person, that her or his "blindness" is not an ontologically differentiating feature.

### **The Meanings of Blindness**

The NFB argues that it is a strained and ludicrous endeavour to avoid such straightforward, respectable words as blindness, blind, the blind, blind person, or blind persons (Jernigan, 1993).

However, it will now be demonstrated that the briefest analysis of dictionary definitions reveals the word *blind* to be far from straightforward and not particularly respectable.

In dealing with the notion of straightforwardness, consideration might be given to the fact that *The Encarta World English Dictionary* (1999) provides thirteen entries for the adjective *blind*, only one of which pertains to the medical condition. With allusion to the ancient Samson myth, another definition explains blind rage and blind fear as something that is so extreme and uncontrollable as to make somebody behave irrationally. A further entry, though botanical in its usage, alludes to the slightly less ancient myth of Oedipus on which the psychoanalytic synonymy between blindness and castration is predicated, for the adjective *blind* is sometimes employed to describe a plant in which growth stops because the growing point is damaged. The ten definitions that remain are split between (1) concealment and (2) ignorance. Firstly, pertaining to concealment, a blind corner does not give a clear view and is

possibly dangerous; a blind stitch is hidden from sight on the underside of a fabric; a blind wall is without doors or windows; a blind experiment is one in which information is withheld in order to obtain an unprejudiced result; and a blind tunnel is closed off at one end. Secondly, pertaining to ignorance, a person is rendered blind to the consequence of her or his actions if unwilling or unable to understand something; to be in a blind stupor is to be lacking awareness; blind prejudice is an attitude that is not based on fact, that is usually total and unquestioning; a blind taste test is done without looking; and a blind presentation is done without preparation or the relevant information.

As well as illustrating that the word "blind" is not straightforward, the fairly representative (but far from exhaustive) list of dictionary definitions challenges the assertion of respectability. This is not a quality that usually is evoked by citations of fear, rage, concealment, ignorance and castration. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the English language is

'peppered with words and phrases' like 'blind' that 'carry with them moral and ethical implications' (Davis, 1995, p.5).

Moreover, since the adjective "blind" derives from the same Indo-European expression as *blunder*, the 'underlying idea' of which is of someone wandering around in darkness (*The Encarta World English Dictionary*, 1999), it is evident that the problem is not only in the numerous pejorative connotations, not only in the way that meanings have developed, for the 'anti-blind prejudices of society are built into our very language' (Kirtley, 1975, p.41).

The psychosocial burden is worsened when the word "blind" is used as a noun and combined with the definite article. The denotation is one of a homogenous group, for individuality is displaced in favour of a jaded, representational construct. It is therefore little wonder that in the view of psychologist Alan Dodds, this term "the blind" posits a 'barrier between our ability to empathize with another human being who may just happen to be unable to see, but who is otherwise embedded in the same

human condition as ourselves' (1993, p.5).

### **Reducing the Burden**

Despite the weight of this psychosocial burden, new terminology is not accepted easily into colloquial English.

Putting aside the appropriation argument, it remains that ancient constructs of "the blind" provide considerable comfort for numerous persons who feel the need to endorse stereotypes and other forms of social prejudice. It must also be appreciated that at a personal level what is important is the 'speed and naturalness with which one can adapt one's language to fit one's developing thought', that until a 'form of words has been fully internalised, practised, corrected and recorrected, there will be hesitation and clumsy circumlocution' (Roaf, 1992, p.340).

For many such reasons it is argued that new terminology will cause confusion, but is this not true of the current juxtaposition of a blind person who can and a partially sighted person who cannot read print? What about the partially sighted person who does and the blind person who does not require assistance with

mobility?

Before considering how the psychosocial burden might be lifted, attention should be paid to the point that new terminology is 'not likely to be effective unless such attitudes have already improved, for without this change, the older, prejudicial meanings would simply become reattached to the liberalized vocabulary' (Kirtley, 1975, p.41). This is true, but so too is the unlikelihood that attitudes will improve through the use of terminology to which prejudicial meanings are inherent.

As is evident in the title of *The British Journal of Visual Impairment*, the endeavour to release the psychosocial burden of the term "blindness" is already ongoing. This terminology has proven useful for subscribers to the British social model of disability, which states that while some persons have impairments, it is by society that they are disabled. The problem is that impairment tends to be defined as the lessening or absence of ability, of a particular physical function; and the act of damaging something, the causing of injury or harm to



something, such as the health of a particular area of the body (*The Encarta World English Dictionary*, 1999). What this implies is that if vision is to be impaired, it must at some point be intact, a claim that cannot be made of persons who are sightless from birth - that is, persons who are unsighted.

Also problematical in general usage is terminology like "the sightless", which is erroneous with or without the definite article. To be sightless is to be without sight, and this is usually not true of persons who are registered as blind. In fact, according to the Royal National Institute for the Blind, only eighteen percent of 'registrably blind' persons have nothing more than light perception (Bruce et al, 1991, p.6). Moreover, 'only about 10 percent of the legally blind' have a 'complete absence of any visual experience' (Kleege, 1999, p.14).

## **Conclusion**

Having considered appropriation and alternative terminology, one suggestion might be to draw on American disability studies,

to take the term *people with disabilities* to the more specific level of *persons with visual disabilities*. With no ascription of homogeneity or other such inaccuracies, this term could be applied to the group of persons who are, after all, of no particular class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, persons with and without multiple disabilities, persons who, with varying degrees of severity, have numerous congenital and adventitious eye conditions. That said, it must be acknowledged that the word disability is in itself a product of ableist ideology, that even when seized on in an endeavour to control its usage, 'the term still serves at least two masters' (Davis, 1995, p.xv). Thus, as with "blindness", appropriation might come to ascribe the term *disability* with another, more empowering meaning, but the displacement of those that are current is unlikely. In short, as a product of ableism, the suggested term *persons with visual disabilities* leaves much room for improvement, but seems quite pertinent, quite accurate, when applied to persons who are forced to exist in an ableist context.

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