



This is about Us

“Us versus them” dynamics are all around us, and our language can create these unnecessary barriers and divisions. Language can also unite us, and can help people see commonality.

As advocates, we want to make sure that access to safe, decent, and affordable housing is *our* problem. We want to avoid divisive language, and unintentionally creating an “us versus them” dynamic. Language that separates us also dehumanizes people and groups. Luckily there are some strategies we can use to make sure we’re not dividing people with our language.

Background

As an advocate for affordable housing, you have seen and heard opinions about who need help to make ends meet, people who receive food stamps, and people who receive safety net services. Research has shown that people express disdain for people who are poor or homeless. Studies have examined people’s brains while showing them photos of people experiencing homelessness, and the same areas of their brain are activated as when they are looking at garbage. When these same people were then asked a question about the person in the picture that worked as a reminder of their humanity, a different part of the brain was activated.

There are things we can do to change this. People view other people differently when they can see them as people first, as part of “us,” rather than “them.” Recent research by John A. Powell puts forward a theory about a “Circle of Belongingness.” He theorizes that we care about people inside our circle, or who are “like us,” and want to help them, while we feel less concerned about people we see as outside the circle, or different from us. He suggests we find ways to expand our circles of concern and belongingness to bring more people inside the circle.

There are a few ways to do this. We need to change the way we talk about people we serve through our organizations. When we refer to people we serve as “the poor” or “the homeless,” we are defining them by their situation, and reducing them to their economic condition. We know as housing advocates that homelessness is usually temporary, and that people can, with the right help and support, move out of poverty. So let’s talk about homelessness and poverty as a temporary situation. Instead of saying “the homeless,” talk about “people experiencing homelessness.” Instead of “the poor,” try out “people with low incomes” or “people living in poverty.”

Questions to Ask Yourself

1. What are the common language shortcuts you use in your work? How do you refer to people your organization serves or that you advocate for in ways that may treat them as “other?”
2. How could you change your language to help bring people your organization serves inside of the circle? What phrase could you use that starts with “people who” or “people with?”
3. How can you help policy makers or decision makers see conditions like homelessness or poverty as temporary situations, rather than permanent?

Examples:

Otherizing: City council members recently voted unanimously to criminalize homelessness.... A hotline will be set up for passersby to “report” a homeless person that needs to be removed, additional police will be dispensed to monitor the streets and vans will escort the homeless to the shelter. This is an opportunity for us to come together as a community to develop a long-term response to this problem. This problem has plagued us for a generation and a half at least.

Humanizing People Experiencing Homelessness: “On Tuesday, the Homeless Leadership Coalition released data collected during its annual one-day Central Oregon homeless count. The results provide a numerical snapshot of homelessness in the region. The number of people lacking long-term fixed shelter was 2,132. That number is down from the nearly 2,300 counted last year...Kenny LaPoint is the co-chair of the Homeless Leadership Coalition. “Every single number in that count is a person. It’s a family. It’s a child. It’s a man. It’s a woman. And I think that as long as we have one person on that count that the Homeless Leadership Coalition is going to be working hard,” he said.” (<http://www.opb.org/news/article/survey-shows-increase-long-term-homelessness-central-oregon/>)

Other Tips:

- › Make sure your language says “people who” or “people with,” and then the condition they find themselves in.
- › Don’t use language like “the poor” or “the homeless,” as it defines the person by the situation, and distances us from them.

More Resources

Read “Reacting to the Poor - Negatively,” Philadelphia Inquirer: http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20130805_Reacting_to_the_poor_-_negatively.html

Read “Why Do We Otherize?” by Tom Moon: http://www.tommoon.net/articles/why_otherize.html

Read “Poverty and Race through a Belongingness Lens” by John A. Powell: <http://www.nwaf.org/FileCabinet/DocumentCatalogFiles/Other/PMpowell.pdf>

Read “Talking about Poverty in a Jobs and Economy Framework” by Shawn Fremstad: <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/poverty-2011-09.pdf>

Read “We Might Be More Racist Than We Think We Are” by Susan Fiske: http://www.alternet.org/story/148871/we_might_be_more_racist_than_we_think_we_are

Exercises

- › Take a look at something you’ve written recently. Highlight or underline the places where you use language like “the homeless” or “the poor” or any place where you create an us versus them situation.
- › Now, try rewriting it or write something new – what words can you substitute to start with “people” and not the condition?
- › Keep practicing – this can feel bulky and awkward for a while! It’s so important to remember to put people first!

Next Steps

- › Listen to others in conversation. Try to notice when language distances people from each other.
- › If you work directly with people experiencing housing instability or homelessness, ask them how they feel distanced from others.
- › Start to shift the language within your organization – your website, your newsletter, even your mission statement – to put the person first, and the condition second. Does it feel different? Does it start a different conversation? Does this change your relationship with people receiving services from your organization?
- › What are other ways we can bring more people into the “circle of belongingness” as articulated by John A. Powell?