


# PERSON VS. IDENTITY FIRST LANGUAGE

## RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

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Recently, the use of person-first versus disability-first language has prompted significant discussions in journalism, the media, as well as scholarly writing (Halle, 2019). This is a very sensitive yet important discussion, specifically with the ability/disability community in which "a long history of erasure, exploitation, stigma, and misunderstandings has led to strong emotions about how people with disabilities - or disabled people - are identified and discussed" (Halle, 2019). In North America, the use of person-first language was introduced in the late 1980s (Bickford, 2004, p. 121). Advocates, stakeholders, and scholars have described that the use of specific terminology and language plays a significant role in the way that people's lived experiences are perceived because different definitions carry with them various connotations (Lipscomb, 2009, p. 22). As such, many scholars, advocates, and stakeholders have argued that person-first language takes these perceptions and connotations into account by placing the emphasis on the person rather than the disability (Lipscomb, 2009, p. 22).



The use of person-first language was slowly adopted across Canada and the United States and is now dominantly used within policy documents and scholarly literature (Simonsen & Mruzcek, 2019) Person-first language, aligned with the social model of disability, was "intended to shift the focus on the impairment to the social barriers that impeded full participation in the community" (Simonsen & Mruzcek, 2019) Additionally, person-first language was intent to advocate for the humanity of a disabled individual over their disability (Bickford, 2004, p. 120)

In recent years, however, many disability activists have expressed a preference for identity-first language, drawing comparison to the ways in which categorizations, such as gender or nationality, are integrated into daily conversations (Simonsen & Mruzcek, 2019). Some scholars have argued that similarly to gender and nationality, for example, an individual's disability cannot be separated from the way that they experience the world around them (Simonsen & Mruzcek, 2019). Further, others have argued that person-first language creates a distinction between a person's worth and their disability, instead "suggesting that the disability is inherently negative" and akin to a disease (Brown, 2012). Identity-first language is aligned with the minority model of disability "which asserts that disability is a diverse cultural experience and an essential identifier" (Altman, Albrecht, Seelman, & Bury, 2001, p. 119). Furthermore, many disability advocates, specifically those within the autism movement, have emphasized the importance of exploring differences not simply as disabilities (Kapp, 2020, p. 1). Instead, the neurodiversity movement within autism encourages understanding disability "in social terms of human rights and identity to accept, rather than as a medical collection of deficits and symptoms to cure" (Kapp, 2020, p. 1).

As a result, many organizations, such as the National Federation for the Blind adopted a resolution opposing person-first language saying that the notion implies shame, and does the opposite of fostering equality (Dunn & Andrews, 2015, p. 257). Additionally, deaf-culture organizations have long promoted "deaf-first language" as a means of celebrating deaf culture and identity (Dunn & Andrews, 2015, p. 261). Some scholars have suggested that the degree to which people use identity-first language is related to their stage of disability identity development (Dunn & Burcaw, 2013, p. 150).

Many disability scholars and writers have argued that there are no strict rules that researchers should abide by, other than that it is the responsibility of the researcher to accommodate the preferences of the people that they are speaking to (National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2018, p. 1). Other advocates within disability culture recommend alternating person-first language with identity-first language (Simonsen & Mruzcek, 2019). Others have argued that alternating between identity-first language and person-first language can also be interpreted as a failure of researchers to recognize the importance of this discussion within the lived experiences of individuals (Bickford, 2004, p. 122). Additional advocates have argued that most of the literature describing the use of language and disability "reflects the opinions of professionals" and very rarely involves the input of stakeholders (Bickford, 2004, p. 126).



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