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Alexandra Cox[1]

Abstract

This brief think piece considers the uses of "people first" language in the context of incarceration, both from a historical and contemporary perspective, and offers some thoughts about the use of this language by prison researchers. It focuses on the uses of such language in the context of disability studies and rights, and the focus on language by activists working to challenge systemic racism and abuse in prison systems in the 1960s and 1970s. It makes an argument for prison researchers to work intentionally with their use of language in keeping with broader disciplinary concerns around meaning making in prisons.

Keywords

stigma, labeling, convict code, person first

> Why pretend these words don't seize our breath?
> Prisoner, inmate, felon, convict.
>
> Reginald Dwayne Betts, Felon: Poems (2019)

The meanings of language change over time. A word like "inmate," now commonly associated with imprisonment, first appeared in the English language in 1589 to represent someone who is a mate to another, especially in a dwelling place, and has maintained that definition in the Oxford English dictionary. Yet the social and colloquial meanings of "inmate" have ebbed and flowed over time—a period of nomenclature transition of American prisons during the 1970s, for example, from "prisons" to "correctional facilities" also involved a shift from the terms "prisoner" to "inmate" in official discourse (Garland, 2001).[1]

Our choices about the words that we use to describe imprisonment have arguably been shaped by our evolving sense of the power of human meanings in shaping human identities. American social theorist George Herbert Mead (1913) advanced some of the earliest claims about how the self is formed in interaction with others; his work arguably birthed the symbolic interactionist

[1] University of Essex, UK

Corresponding author:
Alexandra Cox, Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK.
Email: alexandra.cox@essex.ac.uk

tradition, which had a significant influence on the study of stigma, particularly the stigma of criminality (Goffman, 1963). Sociologists of deviance identified the power of labeling in shaping future behaviors (Becker, 1966; Lemert, 1951), and their work challenged the role of state interventions in individual lives (see e.g. Schur, 1973).

The very condition of imprisonment is one that suggests a relationship of interaction and one of power—between the keeper and the kept. People incarcerated in prison have long understood that experience, and increasingly given voice to it over the course of the 20th century. In 1971, men incarcerated at Attica state prison in New York crafted a set of demands for the state to systematically address the conditions of confinement in the prison (Thompson, 2016). In their manifesto, the men of Attica declared:

> WE are MEN! We are not beasts and do not intend to be beaten or driven as such. The entire prison populace has set forth to change forever the ruthless brutalization and disregard for the lives of the prisoners here and throughout the United States. (Marable and Mullings, 2009: 467)

This call to be recognized as men resonates with a campaign launched by Black male Memphis sanitation workers in which they held a placard saying "I am a Man," an act of resistance to the othering language of American apartheid under Jim Crow. This also reflects the engagement of radical prison activists with the work of scholars like the Algerian psychiatrist Franz Fanon (1967) and sociologist W.E.B. DuBois (1903), who wrote about the process of racialized interpellation that takes place in the act of othering (Burton, 2016).

Radical prison activists in the 1960s and 1970s used the official language of the prison state to challenge its power. George Jackson, a member of the Black Panthers who was incarcerated in California prisons, pointed to the "convict class" as a kind of lumpenproletariat that would play a role in revolutionary action against the American state (Jackson, 1994 [1970]). Jackson argued that "The prison movement is aimed at the protection and liberation of political prisoners and the convict class in general" (Prison Action Project, 1975: 40). Prisons became sites of meeting and organizing for a number of groups involved in the Black liberation movement (Berger, 2013). Jackson argued that the men in prison with him were "The most dedicated, the best of our kind—you'll find them in the Folsoms, San Quentins, and Soledads. They live like there was no tomorrow" (1994 [1970]).[2] Jackson's work prefigured a motto of a number of formerly incarcerated activists today: "Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution" (Martin, 2017).

The prison abolition movement in Europe and the United Kingdom similarly focused on critiquing the tools of the powerful in their efforts to dismantle the prison system. The Norwegian sociologist Thomas Mathiesen (2016: 52) cautioned against using the terminology of the powerful to abolish systems of control. The UK organization Preservation for the Rights of Prisoners (PROP), which organized for the abolition of prisons in England in the 1970s, were concerned with working "against the language of the state" as opposed to creating a new language for imprisonment.[3] Chris Tchaikovsky and Pat Carlen, member of Women in Prison, focused on the de-pathologization of women, as opposed to use the terminology of rehabilitation, to argue for more rights for women in prison.

Tchiakovsky and Carlen worked within a context which recognized the power of the state to pathologize, particularly for people with physical and mental health disabilities. A movement began in the 1970s to advance what has been termed "people"- or "person first" language. This was an effort to move away from stigmatizing or labeling language about disabilities and health conditions, and toward language that recognized the "person first," ahead of the condition or

diagnosis. For example, using a person first approach, one might say "person with disability" as opposed to "disabled person."

As the disability rights movement gained traction in the United States in the 1970s, the uses of person-centered language expanded (Jensen et al., 2013). This language appeared in the Denver Principles, drafted by a group of activists living with HIV/AIDS, in 1983. In those principles, the group articulated a person-centered vision in direct response to the stigma that people with the illness faced:

> We condemn attempts to label us as "victims," a term which implies defeat, and we are only occasionally "patients," a term which implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence upon the care of others. We are "People With AIDS." (Anon, 1983)

Some have attributed this statement to the beginnings of a movement for patients' rights.

Today, it is somewhat commonplace to see the use of person-first language in psychological and educational discourses. The most common linguistic construction in the United States is arguably the use of the post-modified noun, for example, people with mental illness (Granello and Gibbs, 2016). This language has been more recently adopted globally in documents such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Numerous professional associations, primarily those based in the United States, have issued language guidance for the publication of articles in research journals. In the psychological context, the American Psychological Association (1992), American Psychiatric Association, and the American Medical Association (2007) have all issued language guidance. The addiction and recovery establishment have also adopted destigmatizing language in describing people who use drugs, with the journal *Substance Abuse* adopting a person-first framework (Broyles et al., 2014).

The use of person-first language has been slower to come in the world of criminal justice but has gained increasing traction. A former member of the Black Panthers who was incarcerated at Attica during the uprising of 1971, Eddie Ellis, came home from prison in the mid-1990s to New York City to work as a community organizer and activist. It was his time incarcerated at Attica that Ellis developed his perspective on the language of the incarcerated. Ellis founded the Center for NuLeadership in New York City and penned a letter on language in 2007 which was widely distributed in activist circles. In the letter, he writes:

> One of our first initiatives is to respond to the negative public perception about our population as expressed in the language and concepts used to describe us. When we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons—all terms devoid of humanness which identify us as "things" rather than as people. These terms are accepted as the "official" language of the media, law enforcement, prison industrial complex and public policy agencies. However, they are no longer acceptable for us and we are asking people to stop using them. (Ellis, 2007)

Ellis's language letter followed the establishment of an organization in California in 2003, All of Us or None, which was led by formerly incarcerated people. They, like Ellis, rejected the use of stigmatizing language.

Ellis's letter and the work of All of Us or None was deeply influential. In the realm of advocacy, it is relatively commonplace for everyone from grassroots activists to high-level

foundation staff in the United States to advocate for ''person-first'' language to describe people involved in the criminal justice system (see e.g. Fortune Society, n.d.; Osborne Association, 2019; Underground Scholars Initiative, 2019). In 2019, a coalition of organizations based in New York City started a hashtag campaign entitled #HumanFirst aimed at promoting the uses of such language. In 2016, the Urban Institute, a 50-year-old mainstream liberal think tank, released a position statement entitled ''People First: Changing the Way We Talk about Those Touched by the Justice System'' (LaVigne, 2016). A number of people have advocated for the elimination of terms like ''ex-offender'' and ''ex-con'' to stop identifying people by their conviction after they have completed it (Law and Roth, 2015), offering instead the term ''formerly incarcerated person.'' The Prison Fellowship, a Virginia-based organization, and several others, have promoted the use of the term ''returning citizens'' in an affirmation of individual's citizenship rights in the face of felony disenfranchisement laws. In the work of advocates and activists fighting against the uses of immigration detention, as well as scholars writing about people facing deportation and removal, the terms ''undocumented'' and ''unauthorized'' have come to replace terms like ''illegal'' or ''immigrant'' (Armenta, 2017). The work of advocates and activists spread to the domains of journalism. The *New York Times* Editorial Board issuing a statement against the use of stigmatizing terms like ''felon'' and in favor of person-first language (Editorial Board, 2016, see also Keller, 2015).

In the realm of the state, President Obama (2017) penned an article in the *Harvard Law Review* about his criminal justice reform strategies, invoking language like ''formerly incarcerated individuals''; indeed, a group of formerly incarcerated leaders, including the founder of All of Us or None, visited the White House during his tenure. As a result of this advocacy, the US Department of Justice stopped using terminology like ''felons'' and ''convicts'' during Obama's tenure. In 2016, the head of Pennsylvania's Department of Corrections eliminated the use of the words ''offender'' and ''felon'' in official discourse (Branham, 2019). In 2016, the Washington State Department of Corrections issued a policy requiring that people incarcerated in its state prisons no longer be referred to as ''offenders'' and instead refer to people inside as ''individuals'' and ask for staff to refer to them by their first names (Jenkins, 2016). The San Francisco Board of Supervisors adopted guidelines in 2019 advocating for ''person-first'' language in criminal justice contexts, advocating for terminology like ''young person with justice system involvement'' instead of ''juvenile delinquent'' (Matier, 2019). The American Correctional Association is in discussions to develop a glossary of appropriate terms for describing people in the justice system.[4]

The promotion of destigmatizing language has been rarer in countries outside of the United States, although this may partially reflect a distinct difference in the overall framing of people in prison: As suggested by James Q Whitman (2003), American prison philosophies are oriented around approaches of ''degradation,'' whereas it is more common for European justice systems to embrace ideas of ''dignity.'' Indeed, some changes with respect to language have come recently in England and Wales, when in 2008 the Ministry of Justice unofficially urged prison staff to stop using the term ''inmate'' and start using the term ''prisoner'' (Whitehead, 2008). The Nelson Mandela rules on prison, released by the United Nations in 2015, only includes two mentions of the term ''inmate,'' 279 references to the word ''prisoner,'' and over 50 mentions of the word ''persons'' to refer to people who are incarcerated. This arguably reflects a shifting global language of imprisonment, although documenting this shift can be quite difficult.

Justifications of the use of person-centered language

Below, I consider the claims made in support of person-centered language, as well as some of the claims against such language.

Language and stigma

An argument for the use of person-centered language is that it is a generally destigmatizing approach to people who face innumerable consequences—politically, socially, and psychologically—as a result of being affixed with a label that identifies them as "criminal." For example, a recent statement by activists advocating for person-centered language points to these stigma:

> The mass incarceration system has relied on the same kind of dehumanizing language to sustain and legitimize its abuses. Words like felon, convict, criminal, prisoner, offender, and perpetrator create a paradigm where the person is removed from the equation and individuals are defined by a single experience. These labels ignore the social, economic, and political drivers of mass incarceration and deprive people of their complex identities. They make reentry into society increasingly difficult due to stigmas and prejudices associated with these labels. (George and Mangla, 2019)

These advocates argue that the stigmatizing effects of language can negatively affect a person's ability not only to participate fully in social life and that they deprive people of their full personhood. Researchers have recognized that the collateral consequences of incarceration, associated with the stigma of a criminal conviction, have grown much graver since the time of the early labeling theorists (Kurlychek et al., 2006; Love et al., 2013; Uggen et al., 2014). Contemporary empirical tests of labeling theory (Bernburg and Krohn, 2003; Bernburg et al., 2006; Chiricos et al., 2007; Murray and Farrington, 2017; Paternoster and Iovanni, 1989) have demonstrated that the label of "criminal" has lived effects. For example, de Vel-Palumbo et al (2019) argue that essentializing language about particular categories of offending, such as sexual offending, results in more punitive attitudes toward that category of people.

Shadd Maruna and others have written about how a de-labeling and stigmatizing process can play a role in successful reintegration of an individual (Maruna et al., 2004), particularly through what has been termed a "Pygmalion effect," when a person's positive self-identity is reinforced through supervisory, educative, or social control agencies they interact with (Maruna et al., 2004, 2009; Willis, 2018). Le Bel (2009) writes about the ways that formerly incarcerated people draw on people-first language strategies to engage in activism and organizing, and how these strategies may aid in the desistance process.

The promotion of non- or destigmatizing language about incarceration has filtered into scholarly and professional practice, particularly in medicine, and has been framed as having salutary effects on how individuals are understood by providers. In a recent article of the *Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges*, the authors argue that the use of stigmatizing language creates patient mistrust in the medical establishment (Bedell et al., 2019). The use of non-stigmatizing language has also been advocated for in *JAMA*, the Journal of the American Medical Association, and in *BMC International Health and Human Rights* (Tran et al., 2018). In the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, the authors suggest that "inclusive" language about offending may have positive benefits for the "social, emotional, and physical well-being of individuals, families, and communities" (Bedell et al., 2018: 1141).

Language and systemic change

Some have also suggested that the uses of person-first language may promote broader social and cultural changes in the perceptions of individuals who have been imprisoned or charged with crimes. The editorial board of the journal *Sexual Abuse* called for person-centered language in the description of people engaged in sexual harm (Willis and Letourneau, 2018). This was partially recognizing that there are meaningful and significant political and public policy effects of the uses of terminology like "child molester," such as through the uses of registries, place-based restrictions, and the expression of vigilantism toward people convicted of sex offenses (Willis, 2018).

Causally linked to cognition

The claims charted above are largely theoretical ones, not necessarily supported in the empirical work. They rest in part on a logic which assumes that language shapes our ideas. The discipline of linguistics has long included debates about the impact of language on thought. Perhaps the most well-known theorists associated with the idea that language shapes thought were the linguistic anthropologists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. They are most widely associated with the idea that language determines thought, although their own ideas were relatively nuanced in the matter. The concept of linguistic relativity suggests that there is a relationship between language and cognition; linguistic determinism suggests a causal relationship between language and cognition. In the field of linguistics, pure linguistic determinism is approached with a great deal of skepticism (Gentner and Goldin-Meadow, 2003: 3). The idea of linguistic relativity is more frequently supported in the empirical literature (Casasanto, 2008).

Empirical evidence has pointed to limited links between language and its immediate effects on thought, but weaker versions of the theory have found some levels of empirical support (Lucy, 1997; Malt and Wolff, 2010; Pae, 2012; Regier and Kay, 2009).[5] The research in this area has focused primarily on how language may shape perceptions of space, color, and time, as well as second language acquisition or learning. In general, linguistic anthropologists and cognitive psychologists have shifted toward the view that conceptual structures are universal and that semantic structures reflect cognitive structures (Gentner and Goldin-Meadow, 2003). This opposition to linguistic determinism was rooted in an argument for the humanizing potential of language, and the idea that "all languages are equal because all are expressions of our essential shared humanity" (Cameron, 1999: 155).

There is limited empirical research documenting the uses and impact of person-first language, although a recent study exploring the uses of person-first language to describe people with a mental illness found that respondents displayed lower levels of tolerance for people using the premodified term "the mentally ill" (Granello and Gibbs, 2016). The study surveyed samples of university students, adults, and professional counselors and found that professional counselors had the largest differences in tolerance based on language, and the authors of the study note the absence of empirical evidence testing these ideas (although see Imhoff, 2015b; Montagnolo, 2019; Noble and Marson, 2016). In the realm of criminal justice, Imhoff (2015a), using online experimental methods involving a total of 345 participants, found high degrees of punitiveness among the participants toward people who were labeled "pedophiles" as opposed to "persons with sexual interest in children." Subsequent research in the area of sexual offending, also using experimental online methods, has found a correlation between stigmatizing language and support for punitive

policies (Harris and Socia, 2014), and a willingness to volunteer to support people charged with sex offenses (Lowe and Willis, 2019).

Criminologist Michael Coyle (2013) examined the discourses of what he terms ''justice language'' in his book *Talking Criminal Justice*, where he engages in discourse analysis about the role of language in generating social understandings. However, he does not specifically address the debates about person-first language. In the first study of its kind focused specifically on the language related to criminal record stigma, stimulated by the change in language policy by the US Department of Justice, Denver et al. (2017), using experimental data from two large samples, found that the use of crime versus person-first language for people convicted of violent crimes negatively impacted on people's perceptions of the individual's risk of recidivism. The authors focused on whether person-first language impacted on the participants' perception of the risk of recidivism and also zeroed in on whether the type of crime, the time since release, and the employment context mattered in this assessment. The authors found that the language that is used to describe people only had an effect for people charged with convictions for violent crimes, and that these perceptions translate into people's decisions to engage in job denial. In summary, they claim that ''the violent offender label is particularly virulent and powerful'' in the context of American life (Denver et al., 2017: 156). The authors endorse the US Department of Justice initiative to eliminate stigmatizing language and point to the continued use of stigmatizing terms in the criminological literature. There is no other empirical research in this specific area since the study by Denver et al. was published.

Debates about and critiques of person-first language

The role of person-centered language is not without contestation or debate. Some have argued that the use of person-first language, without being coupled with the fair treatment of the people for whom the language is used, is an empty gesture which does not actually play a role in changing the way that people are treated (Gernsbacher, 2017). Others, drawing from critiques of linguistic determinism, argue that efforts to use people-first language are crude interpretations of linguistic relativity and do not play a meaningful role in changing behaviors (Halmari, 2011).

One such debate exists around the distinctions between ''people first'' and ''identity first,'' particularly in the field of disability rights (i.e. people with disabilities vs. disabled person). Disability rights activists and scholars have argued against the exclusive use of person-first language and instead for identity-first language in an effort to claim that identity (Dunn and Andrews, 2015). Some argue that the use of the word ''disabled'' implies that an identity is pathologized, rather than actually being one that can be normalized (Kraus, 2008). In other words, consistent with labeling theory, the identity is only made abnormal as a result of being named as such. This effort to claim the positive aspects of a disability-driven identity is one which sees that identity as largely coopted by other institutions of control (Dunn and Andrews, 2015). Motivated by other identity-based movements, a recent hashtag campaign entitled #SaytheWord promotes the use of disability-first language in public use (Andrews et al., 2019).

Others have made the argument that reclaiming stigmatized terms is an act of empowerment and resistance. Resonances of this can be found in the early work of radical prison activists in their uses of the word ''con,'' for example. Convict Criminology, a group of academics who have experience in the prison system which was established in the late 1990s, have had internal debates about the uses of language; some have argued for the reclaiming of the term ''convict,'' others for a shift toward more people-centered language (Tietjen, 2019). The group's name has stood strong. The

idea that the state itself can be the source of labels but also the site through which labels can be mocked, subverted, and challenged is also a significant one.

This work on subversion also highlights the tenuous and fluid nature of terminology—those in power can also exploit the terminology of person-first language for their uses. In emerging critiques of prison reform efforts aimed at beautifying prison landscapes, building ''treatment campuses,'' and engaging in what have been called ''reformist reforms'' (Gilmore, 2008), scholars and activists have cautioned against approaches that cloak reform in the mantle of humanism (Kilgore, 2014, Schept, 2015). This might caution us to be wary of the uses of ''appropriate'' language that can be used to conceal inappropriate changes.[6]

The role of language in writing about incarceration

How do academics navigate the terrain of language themselves? Some researchers have argued in favor of the use of terms that are indigenous to people in prison in their scholarly work—that is, if a participant uses the term ''inmate,'' then we should use that term. Others have argued that the use of the word ''prisoner'' is one which has emerged in recent years through the work of activists and political prisoners, as a more appropriate alternative to ''inmate,'' and we should use that term. Some have suggested that this focus on language is a purely North American preoccupation with ''political correctness.'' Others argue against the use of any term that labels people at all, including the word ''prisoner.'' Yet there simply are times when using the term ''prisoner'' captures the person's subject position accurately, just as the word ''student'' might do that in a classroom. It is arguable that the moment is right for scholars of imprisonment to discuss this issue and to be responsive to the concerns raised by scholars in parallel fields.

We must make choices as researchers that are arguably true to the ethical and moral obligations of the research endeavor. At the heart of research about prisons, and the lives that people live within prisons, we examine the way that people make meanings within prisons. But we also examine the way meanings are made. They are made by prison authorities, people who work in prison, volunteers, by other people who are incarcerated, and by advocates and activists. We must be attuned to the histories of the othering of so-called ''deviants'' and ''criminals,'' and how they intersect and collide with classism, sexism, and racism. This also involves a level of respect for an individual's right to claim or reclaim an identity as an act that itself is a choice to analyze in a discursive field. As academics, it is our obligation to take a critical stance on how the meanings that are made in and within prison are constructed and reconstructed.

As the evidence suggests, our use of language may play a limited role in shaping the perceptions of our readers and, as some of the early prison activists recognized, language is powerful. That is, our choices and intentions with respect to language reflect a long and complex history of struggle over the landscape of incarceration. Individuals in prison have experiences that are deeply shaped by but also shape the prisons they live in. They are not simply participants engaging through a functionalist set of ''convict code[s]'' (Sykes, 2007 [1958]), nor also unaffected by the codes and norms of the staff who watch over them (Berger, 2018). People in prison are also not simply atoms, rationally choosing to respond to their individual existence inside. And that includes the staff in those prisons, who are also affected by the precarity of prison existence.

Our word choices are not ones which reflect, necessarily, whose ''side'' we are on (Becker, 1967, Liebling, 2001), but rather how we stand at some distance analytically from the choices that are made by agents of social control and those who are controlled by them. As people who have chosen to study the complex landscape of imprisonment, we have an ethical duty to the people we

interview and observe to understand the way that meanings are made about them, and how they make meanings. It is not our job to "humanize," as some have suggested (people in prison are already human) but to understand the ways that the people at the center of our inquiry are shaped by social forces. And those people have been incarcerated and will continue to be for the near future, whether the state refers to them as "inmates," "prisoners," or "offenders." For the time being, I choose to write and think about people.

My friend Reginald Dwayne Betts, in his poem "Essay on Reentry," writes about the persistence of prison so many years after it is gone from his life (he spent nine years in prison starting when he was 16). He talks about the words "prisoner," "inmate," "felon," and "convict" "seize[ing] our breath," but also finds that there are, in some ways, no names or words for "this thing that haunts, this thing we become" (Betts, 2019: 49–50). As a writer, Betts thinks carefully about how language moves onto the page, how it centers, and how it shapes meanings for the reader; as someone who has spent many years in prison, he also sees and feels the futility of language in fully capturing the enduring effects of incarceration. Let us take a lesson from him and move forward intentionally, but without the rules to limit and prescribe what shape or meaning a person's existence takes under the influence of our pens.

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1. With thanks to Garrett Felber for pointing out this transition.
2. Folsom, San Quentin, and Soledad are California prisons.
3. Joe Sim, December 2019, personal communication (14 November 2019).
4. With thanks to Lynn Branham for pointing me to this development.
5. This is not an exhaustive survey of the research in this area, which is very extensive.
6. With thanks to the editors for this helpful insight.

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