



People Who Are Homeless Are “People” First: Opportunity for Community Psychologist to Lead Through Language Reframing

Geraldine L. Palmer¹

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Author Biographies: *Geraldine Palmer*, earned her Ph.D. from National Louis University, located in Chicago, Illinois in 2012. After serving for over two decades in the human services sector, primarily working with people who were homeless, she recognized much more work was needed to understand and dismantle systems of inequality that lead to social issues like homelessness. Dr. Palmer is the Managing Director of the Community Wellness Institute, LLC established as an umbrella for her community practice work. She is also an adjunct professor at Adler University, the past chair of the Cultural, Ethnic and Racial Affairs Council of SCRA, and the current Vice Chair of the City of Evanston Housing and Homelessness Commission.

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Corresponding Author: Geraldine L. Palmer. Community Wellness Institute. Email: communitywellnessinstitute@gmail.com

¹ Community Wellness Institute, LCC (CWI)

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Opportunity for Community Psychologists to Lead Through Language Reframing

“Never doubt that a small, group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” - Margaret Mead

Abstract

The words or labels we use to define, describe and categorize people greatly influence public perception and attitudes. In turn, public perceptions and attitudes play an essential role in shaping policies and practices impacting numerous groups of people, including people who are experiencing homelessness. Yet, and perhaps, inadvertently, we continue to use words that categorically label groups of people bringing back historical meanings of oppression and inequality. The purpose of this paper is to: (1) raise awareness that the use of the terms, “the homeless” and “homeless people” in reference to people experiencing homelessness, perpetuate oppression and inequality; and (2) call community psychologists to lead in transforming how we define, describe and categorize people experiencing homelessness. The author reviews literature that looked at historical connotations behind categorical labeling of people who were homeless and links this underpinning to the terms, “the homeless” and “homeless people”. A concluding discussion offers a *language reframing* model including using person-first language, as a methodology for influencing public perception and attitudes.

Introduction

The words or labels we use to define, describe and categorize people greatly influence public perception and attitudes. In turn, public perceptions and attitudes play an essential role in shaping policies and practices impacting numerous groups of people, including people who are experiencing homelessness. Yet, and perhaps, inadvertently, we continue to use words that categorically label groups of people, bringing back historical meanings of oppression and inequality. When a word or words that oppress are used, an individual is not merely assaulted, but the expression leads to the propagation of an entire population of people. Vojak (2009) put forward that, words, explicitly labels, are seldom neutral, but are instead, inundated with meaning, power and status. Mustafa (2011) pointed out, “the

words we use, as well as, actions have an effect on the people around us, and that language has just as much of a role in contributing to oppression as anything else” (para. 6).

Williams (1976/1983, p. 24) argues that labels, negative or positive are constructed, shaped and reshaped by the dominant class with a particular social and historical context. This is important, as terms that describe and categorize people experiencing homelessness, such as “the homeless” and “homeless people” are widely used by those in the general public, helping professions, and in other fields; yet, reflect the core ideologies and economic interests of the dominant class. Additionally, the psychological impacts of labels not only affect the recipients, but are not lost on policymakers, who enact laws, and the public, who most often decide how

community resources should be allocated. Vojak (2009) added that, it is difficult for the hearers of labels, to *not* believe their validity. Rich (2017) proposes that:

By removing people and families from emotionally charged labels, we can then refocus our attention on remedying structural challenges—like a lack of affordable housing, challenges to accessing behavioral and mental health care, and racial inequalities that often make people unable to afford a home (para. 4).

The purpose of this paper, then, is to:

1. Rise awareness that the use of the labels, “the homeless” and “homeless people” perpetuate oppression and inequality; and
2. Call community psychologist to lead in transforming how we define and refer to people experiencing homelessness. The author reviews literature that looked at historical connotations behind categorical labeling of people who were homeless and links this underpinning to the terms, “the homeless” and “homeless people”. In conclusion, the paper offers *language reframing* action steps, including using first-person

language, as a methodology to influence public perceptions and attitudes about people experiencing homelessness.

Labeling theory

A noteworthy point on the labeling theory, relative to this discussion, is, its sociological approach falls with society’s understanding of crime and deviance (Bernburg & Krohn et al., 2014, pp. 69-71). Labeling theory suggest that, when an individual is negatively labeled (or considered deviant), then that individual will practice their new label/identify in ways that match the new label (Asencio & Burke, 2011, pp. 163-182). In developing the argument that deviance is socially constructed, labeling theorist have borrowed from conflict theory to demonstrate *who* is labeled, and *why*. The backdrop of this premise demonstrate that powerful people in society, are the ones who control the labeling process and use it according to their biases and interests. For example, from a critical race perspective, Black/African Americans are more likely than White/European Americans to be labeled criminal or delinquent, as is people categorized as lower-class versus middle-class. Their actual behavior has no relevance (p. 27). Selected examples of this assertion are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Labeling Examples

| Researcher(s)/Author(s) | Examples (General and specific) |
|-------------------------|---|
| Sudder (2016, para. 14) | Black youths – whether guilty or innocent – were branded “criminal” and almost guaranteed a life tethered to the justice system |
| Baker (2013, para. 2) | George Zimmerman labeled 17 year old Trayvon Martin as “deviant”. |

Hall, Phillips and Townsend (2015)

“...Data on studies seeking to understand perceptions of labels found that the use of the label “Black” correlated with White/European Americans’ views of a criminal suspect when that person is identified as “Black” versus “African American.”

Heitzeg (2015) added that white criminality is primarily approached from a medical model. This becomes possible through a “white racial frame” which denotes “whiteness” as normative and white deviance as individual aberration or mental illness. Contrariwise, the same white radical framework constructs Blackness as synonymous with criminality (p. 197).

Categorical Labeling

Embedded in labeling is categorical labeling that defines and classifies groups of people, often of a marginalized or inferior nature, deemed so, by the dominant group. The primary purpose of categories is to synthesize information and use it in making inferences such as predictions (Rosch, 1978). Yamauchi further posit that two core psychological suppositions allow for integration of information and certify the right to induce inferences: (1) matching characteristics between entities; and (2) evidence that exceeds an initial conclusion. These two components, Yamauchi proposes, form an *attribute-based similarity* (p. 538). For example, we could conclude that people who live on the streets, based on tangible evidence, are homeless. We could also say that people who live in shelters are homeless, as well. Therefore, the conclusion, people who live in shelters is reliable, comparable to, people who live on the streets. That is, *if* both people who live on the streets and people who live in shelters have (1) similar characteristics (e.g. no fixed residence) and (2) the enormity of the evidence of people who live in shelters, surpasses that, of the

initial conclusion about people who live on the streets.

A plethora of studies have ensued based on Yamauchi’s *attribute-based similarity* theory. To this end, these studies have shown an association between attribute-based similarity and categorical membership (Heit & Rubinstein, 1994; Lassaline & Murphy, 1996; Murphy & Ross, 1994; Osherson et al., 1990). In the field of social psychology, researchers have focused on similarities such as representative heuristics, prevalence in stereotyping and impression research (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973; Shafir, Smith, & Osherson, 1990; Duckitt, 1992; Hamilton & Sherman, 1994; Stangor, 2000). While there are benefits of attribute-based similarities, such as helping us to understand how categories work, inductions about people that result in categorical labeling such as “the homeless” and “homeless people” often have long-lasting negative outcomes, that are difficult to take back, and result in structural systems of oppression (Schneider & Remillard, 2013; Tsai, Lee, Byrne, Pietrzak & Southwick, 2017). Rich (2017) noted that the use of the terms “homeless people” or “the homeless” to define people experiencing homelessness, can sound more like we are “describing an intractable problem that is about people who are fundamentally different from us” (p. 1). Rich argues that the way we discuss and refer to people who are homeless are equally important as efforts to find causes and end homelessness. The words we use to describe human beings in general, significantly affect our perceptions and attitudes about them, and moreover, labels generate emotional reactions that can create

barriers to understanding, as well as, reinforce stereotypes. Atler (2010) noted that, categorical labeling is a tool that humans use to resolve the impossible complexity of the environments we grapple to perceive. Additionally, similar to so many human faculties, it's adaptive and miraculous, but it also contributes to some of the deepest problems that face our species" (para. 2). Jennifer Eberhardt, a social psychologist at Stanford, and her colleagues (2003) conducted a survey on challenges with labels. Surveying White/European American college students, the researchers showed them pictures of a man whose race (based on skin color) was not easily detectable by the pictures. The man could have been in the Black/African American category or White/European American category--- common labels with connotations of what the terms mean. Findings showed fifty-percent of the students responded the face belonged to a White/European American, while the other fifty-percent reported the face was that of a Black/African American.

In one portion of the experiment, the students were asked to spend four minutes drawing the face that sat on the screen in front of them. Surprisingly, even looking at the same face, at the same time, the students who were inclined to believe that race is an embedded human trait, not a social construct, drew faces that matched the stereotype associated with the label. Thus, the racial labels served as the lens through which the respondents saw the face, and they were not able to perceive the face independent of the label (para. 4). Thus, perceptions that are set up, or framed through language portray the stereotype associated with the label. It is this same premise that apply to people who are homeless. If asked to draw a "homeless person", it is likely respondents in a similar study, would draw a person, probably identified as male, clothed in rags, dirty, and pushing a shopping cart down the street. Yet, research (Jones, 2012) put forward that

nationally, two in five people experiencing homelessness work, even if they cannot afford market-rate housing (p. 5).

Darley and Gross (1983) offer that race isn't the only label that shapes perception. In a classic study conducted by the researchers on labels and class, results showed similar effects as the Eberhart study. Some of the respondents were asked whether a young girl seemed poor or wealthy after watching a video of her playing in her neighborhood and reading a brief background sheet. The segment of students watched the girl playing in a low-income housing development (categorical label) and the parents were described as high school graduates with blue collar jobs (categorical label). The remaining students watched the girl playing as well, but in this study phase, she was playing in a tree-lined, middle-class (categorical label) neighborhood. Her parents were described as college-educated professionals (categorical label). The respondents were then asked to assess the young girl's academic acumen after seeing her replies to a series of achievement-test questions. The video depicted the girl responding inconsistently, sometimes answering difficult questions correctly, but then sometimes answering simpler questions incorrectly. Thus, her academic capabilities, in reality, were difficult to discern. Yet, this factor did not stop the students from using the actor's socioeconomic status as a condition for academic ability. When the actor was labeled "middle-class," the students reported she performed close to a fifth-grade level. When she was labeled "poor", they believed she performed below at fourth-grade level. Categorical labeling is a social construct, such as "race" used to separate people and exclude people who are different in some way from the dominant majority. For example, as "chattels" and slaves, Black/African Americans were separated; when the Japanese Americans were interred in 1942, they were separated. When people who are Jewish were rounded up and

interred in concentration camps, they were separated. Native Americans or American Indians were in America before exploration and have been separated since that time (Bosmajian, 1983).

Bosmajian argued that Hitler's 'Final Solution' appeared reasonable once Jewish people were successfully labeled by the Nazis as "sub-humans", "parasites," "vermin," and "bacilli." The segregation and suppression of Black/African Americans in the United States was justified once they were considered "chattels" and "inferiors." The subjugation of the "American Indians" was defensible since they were defined as "barbarians" and "savages... as long as adult women are "chicks," "girls," "dolls," "babes," and "ladies," their status in society will remain "inferior", such that, they will go on being treated as subjects in the subject-master relationship (p. 139).

This author puts forward that, as long as people homeless go on being labeled "the homeless" or "homeless people", they will continue to be treated as people who have *no right* to decent affordable housing and resources.

Contrarily, cognitive psychologists note that it would be impossible to register the information we process during our lives without the aid of labels like "friendly," "deceitful," "tasty," and "harmful." But it's equally important to recognize that the *people* we label as "black," "white," "rich," "poor," "smart," "simple," and "*the homeless*", may, at some point, seem blacker, whiter, richer, poorer, smarter, simpler (Atler, 2010, para.), or "*more vagrant*"?

Historical Labeling of People Who Are Homeless

The literature has no known empirical studies or theoretical papers, clearly delineating the pathway from early ideologies

and behavior, regarding people experiencing homelessness, to the specific labels, "the homeless" or "homeless people". However, this paper asserts that these labels, continue to represent *groups* of people---who were excluded and ostracized, rather than individuals. When an individual is seen as an individual, no matter what social condition they may be experiencing, they are more often than not, referred to by their given or chosen name, not defined and categorized with labels. With this framework for context, the next section discusses the historical progression of labeling of excluded *groups* of people experiencing homelessness. Replicating English vagrancy laws that were enacted to address what the public considered a crime, and perhaps more importantly, *who* the public viewed as criminals, America enacted its own set of similar laws as early as 1640. Having a number of structures, vagrancy laws, were unique, targeting personal conditions, state of being, and social and economic status, rather than focusing on any particular conduct (Kusmer, 2002). These laws later became the pervasive mechanism for maintaining hierarchy and order in American life. Over time, vagrancy laws and application, targeted people who were homeless and/or poor, calling those in its path, "vagrants", and also focused on labor activists, radical orators, cultural and sexual nonconformists, religious and racial minorities and civil rights protestors. By the mid-20 century, hundreds of thousands of citizens had been arrested based on vagrancy laws. Yet, identifying what qualities brought the attention of the police which turned people into vagrants, has been difficult since its inception, painted with such broad strokes and no parameters (Golobuff, 2018).

Rates of homelessness in America increased as a result of King Philip's War of 1675-1678, sometimes called the First Indian War or Metacomet's (Indian chief) War against Native Americans and their allies in New

England (Kusmer, 2002). During the war, many dwellers in New England were driven out of their homes when towns were totally demolished and forced to seek shelter in the forests or coastal areas, and there they remained idle for some time. Subsequently, laws were enacted to prevent "idleness" in the cities, and the term "idle people" became the label for people experiencing homelessness. As a result, people who found themselves homeless were made servants or indentured servants (Kusmer, 2002).

As rates of homelessness continued to rise, particularly in smaller towns, the label for people homeless became "hobos", in reference to their temporary housing located near train tracks, where they hopped onto trains to various destinations (Kusmer, 2002). Further, Kusmer put forward, after the American Civil War from 1861 to 1875, which seriously perpetuated homelessness, large numbers of men formed part of a counterculture known as "hobohemia" all over the United States. This phenomenon re-surfaced in the 1930s during and after the Great Depression.

Overall, the general public perceived homelessness as a moral deficiency or a severe individual character flaw even from those embracing a Christian perspective. It was typically believed a good Christian, within God's grace, would naturally have their needs met. People outside of that grace somehow were deserving of their plight as God rendered justice accordingly and fairly (Fischer, 2011).

These historical labels discussed have a common denominator with "the homeless" and "homeless people", such that, they continue to denote categories or *groups* of people who do not belong, are excluded and not fit for society. Notably, social labels aren't inherently damaging. When we describe someone as "right-handed" or "Black/African American" this doesn't denote a problem.

However, as labels, they become deleterious when they are associated with negative characteristics, the product of social constructs.

Language Framing: A System of Oppression

A brief review of Margaret Atwood's (1986) *The Handmaid's Tale*, provide a very useful framework for a discussion on the implications of language as a system of oppression. Atwood's work exemplifies that language enables power, and that the ruling class, whether gender, or race exploits language through censorship of literature and control of discourses to strengthen their leadership positions. In the *Tale*, Atwood uses words and sentence structure to demonstrate how a particular society is built on gender inequality found in authoritative language of modern American culture. For example, the names that Atwood uses for the characters (women) are actually labels denoting property:

...Handmaids' names simply reflect which Commander owns them. "Of Fred," "Of Warren," and "Of Glen" are collapsed into "Offred," "Ofwarren," and "Ofglen." The names make more sense when preceded by the word "Property": "Property Offred," for example. Thus, every time the women hear their names, they are reminded that they are no more than property" (p. 305).

Further, Atwood calls a woman in the narrative without viable ovaries and who served no useful purpose for her society, "unwoman". These women in the story were sent to the Colonies (sites similar to plantations) or killed (p. 10). Moreover, the term Handmaid, was representative of women who did have viable ovaries. If these women conceived they continued on as Handmaids. However, if after three houses they did not have a child, they were sent to the Colonies or discarded permanently.

What is particularly applicable to gender inequality or in this discussion, class inequality, (e.g. people who are homeless) is the premise that people, or the public, are prone to accept controlling language because in usage, much of the real meaning behind the words or terms, goes unnoticed. Thus, the readers of Atwood's work are admonished to take a closer look at speech and word choices in general, in efforts to regain control over one's own words and understanding, and the effects of power in using and understanding both. Atwood argues that "as we know from the study of history, no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without integrating many of the elements found in the latter" (p. 305).

Language Reframing: A System of Liberation

FrameWork Institute (2018) reported that the housing and homelessness sector must change the way it dialogues about homelessness, and the people it impacts, if the public is to be convinced it should end. The public takes cues from the more dominant group, and therefore, the framing of language become important in influencing viewpoints and attitudes.

A study, conducted for OpenSource by FrameWorks Institute interviewed experts on homelessness, and the public, in conjunction with an analysis of sector and media narratives. The results indicated that the public hold specific perceptions about who is homeless, as well as root causes. Stakeholders in the sector and media play strong roles in supporting or refuting these perceptions. A key finding showed that any type of closed or limited view of homelessness and people homeless, prevent the public from perceiving homelessness as a broad social issue, and is no respecter of persons. If a closed viewpoint is adopted, a structural focus will recede, and blaming the person is forthcoming. Closed viewpoints are put forward when the sector and media support and encourage narratives

that tell fractured stories---this hinders wider social change action.

A goal of talking differently about homelessness should be put forward in a way that deepens the public's understanding, attract new allies, and foster demand for change. Communication can be a factor in guiding media reports so it moves people to consider and support more of systems level change and solutions. It is also critical that communicators avoid inadvertently reinforcing unproductive attitudes and negative stereotypes, such as continuing to use terms that oppress, that hinder social change, and set the cause back.

Changing the way we speak about homelessness, and in discourse, and reference to people homeless can take place through careful and regulated messaging, that promote new ways of thinking. For example, stakeholders communicating a new message can widen the lens when sharing about people who are homeless, using first-person language. Those on the front lines, such as social service agencies, community psychologists and the like must change the frames to foster new thinking about homelessness, and the people it impacts. The media will follow suit, and reinforce these new patterns of thinking. As one person with lived experience shared:

"...I also make a habit of replacing 'homeless' with 'extreme poverty' when discussing the issue---particularly in U.S. culture. I do this because the stereotypes and misinformation about poverty in the U.S. have resulted in the majority of the public creating meaning for the word 'homeless' and assuming it is the denotation culturally. People are seen as part of the target group, not as individuals; There are very low expectations and fewer options and choices (Nance, 2012, para. 8). Recommendations for advancing language reframing work follows in the next section.

Person-First Language Model

Dickinson and Maryniuk (2017) posit that language reframing is not new (p. 51). For nearly a half of century, psychologists, health professionals and the broader community have been, and are continuing to engage in discourse regarding language used in health care. These conversations included the movement in the early 90s of health literacy. A number of health care entities have joined this movement including American Diabetes Association and the Obesity Society. Psychologists around the world are encouraged to improve, foster and engage in cultural competence and awareness in global communities, and people-first language can do that. Developing cultural competence includes improving communication skills for better understanding diverse groups. Further, the American Psychological Association (APA) advocates for people and person-first language to describe people with disabilities groups (Christopher, Wendt, Marecek, & Goodman, 2014; Balcazar, Suarez-Balcazar, & Taylor-Ritzler, 2009). This author argues that community psychologists in partnership with U.S. social services agencies and international nonprofit government organizations (NGOs) should adopt people-first language in academia and practice.

Contrasting views on people-first language. People-first language is not without its critics. Some have objected that people-first language is awkward, repetitive and makes for tiresome writing and reading. Vaughan (1997 para. 7) suggests that "in common usage positive pronouns usually precede nouns", "the awkwardness of the preferred language focuses on the disability in a new and potentially negative way". According to Vaughan, it only serves to "focus on disability in an ungainly new way" and "calls attention to a person as having some type of 'marred identity'" and is relative to Goffman's (1963) theory of identify (para 7).

Further, in deaf culture, person-first language has long been rejected, but this is understandable. Rather in the deaf community, deaf-first language is used as a source of positive identify. Correct language for this group would be "deaf person" or "hard of hearing person". The phrase "hearing impaired" is not acceptable to most deaf or hard of hearing people because it emphasizes what they cannot do (National Association for the Deaf, 2014). Additionally, rather than people-first language, identity-first language is preferred by many autistic people and organizations run by them (Kenny, Hattlesley & Molins, 2016).

In any case, reshaping language can also serve to create spaces where empowerment, wellness and social justice, have room to blossom. The last sections of this paper highlights the results of a language reframing project, for a social services agency in Chicago and points out similar work the noted Salvation Army has undertaken. This work serves as strong starting points for designing and implementing language reframing projects.

Language Reframing Strategies North Side Housing and Supportive Services, Chicago, IL

Recognizing that categorical labeling used toward people homeless may be seriously impairing their psychosocial wellbeing, Dr. Palmer, as the former executive director of North Side Housing and Supportive Services in Chicago, put together a series of workshops in medical and health care facilities, in board development workshops, conferences, classrooms and other forums on the topic. The goal was twofold: (1) Raise awareness of language and labeling and its negative implications; and (2) change language and labeling in discourse and in reference to people homeless, including in all marketing materials including websites and social media. To this end, without challenge, the

agency adopted the following philosophy of care constructed and set in place by Dr. Palmer:

CONTEXT

Homelessness is not who people are, but a challenging societal issue that North Side Housing and Supportive Services and other agencies are working diligently to end.

DIGNITY & RESPECT

Every person regardless of his or her situation deserves to be treated with dignity and respect

POTENTIAL OF ALL & INDIVIDUALITY

Everyone has an individualized optimal level of capacity. North Side Housing and Supportive Services ensures that our participants have what is needed to build their capacity to whatever their optimal capacity level is; no one person is the same and therefore goals are individualized and not generalized.

EMPATHY

The value of a person at North Side Housing and Supportive Services is not measured by his or her situation at any given time, but by the very fact they are human beings (North Side Housing and Supportive Services, 2018).

The Salvation Army, United States and Global

Given the importance of perceptions, specifically with regard to people who are homeless, and understanding that how their clients see themselves based on the influence of service providers, the Salvation Army understood this philosophy impacts policy and funding. Therefore, the Salvation Army removed labels and translated this into practical principles. It became critical for their staff to avoid seeing people through the lens of current and past housing challenges.

Further, the agency changed the language it uses, with the aim of treating people as active agents of their lives and members of society, rather than passive recipients of services (Salvation Army, 2018).

These type of changes may be subtle, but they represent a shift in the ethos of services. Specifically, Salvation Army staff no longer use terms such as “homeless people” as a primary way of referring to people using the services. This language systems change reflect a broader change in how services are provided to people. When consciousness is raised regarding language and labels used by service providers, and even policymakers, people needing and using services do not readily assume that needing assistance is defining a trait of the individual. Moreover, removing labels more fully eliminates the ideology of blaming the victim, while supporting community psychology values and assumptions.

Opportunities for Community Psychologists

Community psychologists are often on the front lines in our communities striving to advance social change. They should move beyond theory and research to operate from a “grasstops” position. Grasstops meaning having access to policymakers, program designers and administrators, where other stakeholders may not. Their roles are to recognize people’s strengths and resources, work to break down existing social barriers, and emphasize empowerment and collaboration, among other functions (Kloos et al., 2012). These roles are predicated on, and delivered in action through core values that all community psychologists ascribe to, and through these values, many engage in promoting change in systems, organizations, or communities.

Shifting from an individual perspective to a structural/ecological perspective is a

fundamental framework of community psychologists (Kloos et al., 2012). Therefore, viewing language usage through a structural perspective is not far-reaching for academics and practitioners. Language usage require community psychologists to think about how language is structured and applied as a system, particularly as a system of oppression, and how this system impacts the lives of individuals and families (p. 6).

As communities come to believe that the problems it faces, are solvable and that they can do something about it themselves, they are less likely to blame individuals for social issues. This paper contends that one of our tasks as community psychologists is to support the premise that the inhumane uses of language needs interruption and commit to helping dismantle this system. To do so, a place to start is in partnership with social services agencies. Social services agencies are on the front lines as well, working with, and for, people who are homeless, and have the infrastructure in place for getting out awareness campaigns and language reframing projects, at local and global levels. The following actions steps can be used as a model for a starting point for such a project.

Action Steps for Change

1. Collect all types of secondary data on people-first language studies. This information can be accessed from numerous resources including research libraries, and other locations;
2. Set up meetings with social services agencies that provide housing and homelessness services to present the potential language reframing project and propose collaborative partnerships;
3. Work with agencies to hire or consult with community psychologists and/or

communication experts on framing new, or revising existing philosophy's of care;

4. Use media including social services websites, the internet, and print, to frame the messaging and advance its visibility as widespread as possible;
5. Abandon words in academic curriculum, journal publications and practice that denote superiority and exchange them for neutral terms such as "person" or "individual" rather than consumers, or for people-first language such as people who are homeless, or people experiencing homelessness; and
6. Conduct empirical studies on the correlation of language change and psychosocial wellbeing of people impacted by such strategies, as well as the general public.

Conclusion

Language reframing or changing language, as a system, will be no easy task. For one, this system is very rarely, if at all, challenged. Likely, an adaptation takes place, (e.g. self-identity), in this case, people who are homeless, that signals efforts to regain some sense of power. However, often, this behavior further perpetuates the system, and rather than focusing on dismantling systems, people who are homeless, similar to other oppressed groups, are further ridiculed, blamed and stereotyped for their predicament.

Yet, advancing language reformations must continue to influence public perceptions. Research has indicated that public perceptions and attitudes on homelessness and the people it impacts, has been influential in changes in policies, resources and services (Tsai et al., 2017; Tompsett et al., 2006). The largest changes are linked with increased

support for legally allowing people homeless to sleep in public spaces and panhandling. Other changes show higher levels of compassion and less stereotyped perceptions (Tompsett et al., 2006; Tsai et al., 2017).

Quantifying public perceptions and attitudes are beneficial in linkages to directly influencing behavior. In essence, how we see someone shapes how we treat them. For example the more people feel compassion for people who are homeless, the more they donate money. If the media portrayed homelessness as getting worse, instead of better, and people could see there are more structural factors linked to homelessness, than individual deficits, sympathy likely increases. Another example is, the public perception that most people who are homeless have severe mental illnesses and highly engage in substance use and abuse. Yet, based on survey responses of people who are homeless, this viewpoint is not at all accurate (Tsai et al., 2017). Therefore, the more accurate facts are, that get publicized, the more the public will form perceptions and attitudes based on reality, rather than stereotypical and categorical labels, laden with negative associations.

It is the hope of this paper's author and community psychologist, that this paper will motivate other community psychologists and allies to explore the structural system of language and its relative, categorical labeling. In support of several core values of the community psychology field: empowerment, promoting individual health and well-being, respect for human diversity, and social justice, community psychologists will lead in dismantling language systems that harm. While reframing language may be a small step in advancing social change, this action could serve as a "tipping point" (Gladwell, 2002).

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