

Name-calling doesn't solve the problem

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By: Arin N. Reeves, J.D., Ph.D.

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Confrontation fails to bring dialogue, fails to bring resolution

I had a language-arts teacher in high school who abhorred adjectives. One of her oft-quoted principles of excellent writing (attributed to Voltaire) was, "Adjectives are the enemy of the substantive."

She would often scribble this quote on top of graded assignments as a simple explanation for a less-than-stellar grade. To this day, I consciously track how many adjectives I'm using, even though I have a great fondness for using lots of adjectives in my writing.

There is no doubt that adjectives are seen by many as having merely supporting roles in language constructions where nouns are the lead players.

However, when it comes to active inclusion, changing particular nouns into adjectives can allow for a change in the way that those nouns, as nouns, just cannot do. This is especially true when we deal with the -ists in our vocabulary when discussing differences.

The -isms (racism, sexism, etc.) in the lexicon of diversity and inclusion refer to unique doctrines, distinctive collections of ideas or a defined set of beliefs and attitudes that group people based on particular identities and characterize the groups as better than, worse than, similar to and/or different from other groups.

The people who subscribe to these doctrines, ideas or beliefs and attitudes are, therefore, the -ists — the nouns used to represent the people's subscriptions to the -isms.

While the -ist labels make it easy for us to categorize people and name them in ways that separate them from the rest of us who are behaving in more egalitarian ways, they also serve as constraints that prevent the very change we want to activate in order to reduce the -isms and increase inclusion.

Sexism, for example, is discrimination (conscious or unconscious) that typically puts women at a disadvantage on the basis of their sex.

A sexist, then, is a person who engages in this discrimination.

Calling someone a sexist may put responsibility for their discriminatory behavior at his or her feet, but calling someone a sexist will actually make it less likely that the person will take responsibility for that behavior.



The noun constrains the person's ability to change; however, using sexist as an adjective to describe the behavior — as opposed to the person — increases the person's likelihood of taking responsibility for the behavior. Compare "you are a sexist" to "you talked to her in a sexist way."

The noun describes the whole person — a very difficult arena for change. And the latter describes a way of talking — an easier arena for change.

The former triggers immediate defensiveness, but the latter has a greater likelihood of starting a dialogue.

Similarly, telling someone that he or she made a racist statement is different than calling that person a racist.

The dialogue on how the statement was racist and how it can be changed is a much easier dialogue than suggesting to someone that he or she needs to stop being a racist.

While the proposed change is linguistic, the impact of the change is quite transformational in allowing the facilitation of change instead of freezing it.

When sexist, racist and other -ist behaviors are discussed in public discourse in our workplaces, our personal lives or the media, we are quick to label people who exhibited the behaviors as -ists because we want to declare them as bad actors, people who are violating the behavioral norms to which we expect them to adhere.

This works well to disgrace them, shame them or even make them fail in visible ways, but it does not work well to actually change how they will behave in the future.

Labeling people as -ists feels good for the labelers in the short-term, but it only constrains the ability of the labeled to change in the future.

We have to make a decision about whether we want to use -ist as a noun or an adjective.

Do we want to shame people who behave badly, or do we want them to change their behaviors? Do we want a short term shot of vindication or a long-term chance for real change?

I ask these questions fully understanding the power of short-term shots of vindication. It can be cathartic to call someone a racist or sexist because using these labels is all that we can sometimes do to show anger at unacceptable behavior. It may feel good, but it does no good.

Creating environments where people are inspired to actively seek out and include different perspectives requires that we limit the use of -ists in our vocabulary to adjectives and refrain from using them as nouns.

While Voltaire's warning that adjectives are the enemy of the substantive may work in communication generally, using -ist as an adjective may actually lead to the substantive change we are seeking to create in the arena of inclusion.

The original article can be found on Chicago Lawyer Magazine's website at:

<http://www.chicagolawyer magazine.com/Articles/2014/09/DiversityInPractice-Arin-Reeves.aspx>.