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Darcy Haag Granello

The Ohio State University, USA

The power of language: How words can affect tolerance and stigma

Individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses are profoundly affected by stigma. Stigma has been identified as more debilitating and isolating than the mental illness itself and mental health stigma is a significant barrier to help-seeking. Worldwide, people with mental illness are, as a group, devalued and feared by society. Media stories consistently associate mental illness with danger and violence with the result being lowered levels of ascribed humanity to the individuals with mental illness described within the stories. The use of pre-modified nouns (e.g., 'the mentally ill') is a commonly-used approach to describing people with mental illnesses. In this series of studies, the use of pre-modified nouns was compared to post-modified or person-first nouns (e.g., person with mental illness) among U.S. college students, adults in a community sample and professional mental health counselors. Among all groups studied; people who received survey that used the term "the mentally ill" had significantly lower tolerance scores than those who received the survey using the term "people with mental illnesses". Findings from these studies demonstrate that using person-first language is not just an example of political correctness, but can have profound effects on stigma and tolerance. When individuals in all three groups saw the term 'the mentally ill' compared with the term 'person with a mental illness', they were more likely to believe the people described were dangerous, violent and needed coercive handling, that they were inferior people who needed to be treated like children and to distance themselves from interactions with the people described. Those are some powerful reactions and they deserve a powerful response.

Biography

Darcy Haag Granello is a Professor of Counselor Education at The Ohio State University, a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor and Director of The Ohio State University Suicide Prevention Program. She has co-authored three books and published over 60 peer-reviewed journal articles. She has presented more than 200 times at national and international conferences.

granello.1@osu.edu

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