Author’s response to reviews

Title: Words matter: a call for humanizing and respectful language to describe people who experience incarceration

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RESPONSE LETTER

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Words matter: a call for humanizing and respectful language to describe people who experience incarceration

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BMC International Health and Human Rights
Dear Editor and Reviewers,

We are grateful for your comments, which we have addressed hereafter.

To ease your review process, we have also pasted it under the respective answers.

With much appreciation for your review and best wishes,

Nguyen Toan Tran
On behalf of all co-authors

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* Editor Comments:

To the authors:

I am inclined to agree with reviewer 1 and thank you for this contribution to the literature. But please take a bit of time to consider the thoughtful comments of reviewer 2 and revert with a summary of your responses.

Thank you again for this contribution.

* Reviewer reports:

Richard Lines (Reviewer 1): This is a well written and thought out piece on an important topic. It reflects the approach to language I have been personally adopting and promoting in my own work for some years, so in that context I welcome an article that makes a more explicit and thought out case for use of non-stigmatizing language. I hope it gains wide traction and influence.

Authors’ response: many thanks!

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Kelly Moore (Reviewer 2): This article addresses a critically important topic regarding the use of stigmatizing language to describe people in the criminal justice system. Incarcerated individuals are often overlooked as a stigmatized group and there is a need to develop best practices for interacting with this population in a nonjudgmental way. The authors provide useful and practical recommendations for policy, practice, and research. I have a few minor recommendations to improve the article.

The authors could integrate a bit about why people in the justice system often fall subject to such derogatory labels. In contrast to many other stigmatized groups (e.g., people with mental illness, people living with HIV/AIDS), people in the justice system are often viewed as to blame for their incarceration, a belief that may perpetuate the use of stigmatizing labels.

It is important to help community members, healthcare systems, justice systems, and researchers across disciplines to understand the complex psychological, behavioral, and sociocultural determinants of arrest. Such increase in knowledge may help reduce the use of derogatory labels.

The authors might note any significant cultural differences in the use of labels for people in the justice system.

The authors might describe in more detail the process through which stigmatizing labels impact the self-concept and subsequent behavior of stigmatized individuals (i.e., self-stigma). A study by Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney (2016) describes a psychological model of self-stigma specifically applied to people with a criminal record, and states how perceptions of stereotypes can lead individuals to accept negative stereotypes as personally accurate descriptions of themselves. Self-stigma is important to highlight because it is a proposed mechanism for understanding why stigmatized individuals feel demoralized and ashamed, experiences that can lead to avoidance of community members and institutions, and ultimately health disparities.

The authors might discuss some of the barriers to changing stigmatizing language, and reducing stigma more broadly, within healthcare, legal, and other community systems. Many professionals who work with individuals in the justice system experience burn-out, which contributes to their negative attitudes about this population. The use of non-stigmatizing language, especially in the justice system, will be a challenging culture shift that may require special stigma reduction efforts such as providing training/education to increase buy-in, supervising staff in their interactions with incarcerated individuals, and providing feedback in a non-critical way to facilitate change. It may be helpful to acknowledge that terms like prisoner, inmate, convict, etc. have up to this point been socially acceptable (and thus widely used), and at the same time, we now have decades of research showing that these labels are potentially harmful to the health and wellbeing of stigmatized groups.

Authors’ response:

Thank you for your feedback!
First, we agree with the reviewer’s comments regarding stigma related to a criminal record. We are grateful for and have added reference to the Reviewer’s important work on this topic. As such, the text has been amended on line 58 and reads as follows:

“Stigma can be enacted and reinforced through labelling. Such labelling can drive the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination of groups of people, such as individuals involved in the criminal justice system who are often denounced as being responsible for their incarceration. As a result, those in the criminal justice system are excluded from social and economic resources and services that ultimately affect their health and wellbeing [6].”

On line 68 onward, and as follows:

“Such stigma and discrimination can affect the identities of incarcerated individuals, how they see themselves (from perceived stigma to internalized stigma [9]), and how society perceives ‘them’.”

Second, in the submitted manuscript “under Cultivate self-awareness”, we discussed the transformative power of values clarification workshops for professionals (and as follows):

“Values clarification workshops for healthcare (and non-healthcare) professionals and researchers working with people involved in the criminal justice system could be transformative in clarifying values and changing attitudes to improve interactions with others [34],...”

We have now integrated the reviewer’s suggestion on line 193 onward to briefly discuss awareness of the complexity surrounding arrest. In the same paragraph, we added elements on potential implementation barriers. The paragraph now reads as follows:

“Such interventions have the power of challenging prejudices, stigma, and self-stigma by increasing an individual’s awareness of values that may have a bearing on decisions and actions in their lives. Values clarification can therefore enhance our understanding of the complex sociocultural, psychological, and behavioral determinants of incarceration, redirect personal values, and address potential barriers to change the use of inappropriate language (e.g., through supportive supervision of staff working with incarcerated people). These actions can work to assist professionals to prioritize the use of terminology that adheres to our professional mandate: caring for people and supporting them in their journey of recovery and reintegration into society.”

Third, cultural differences may indeed be substantial, which we believe we have implied in two different sections of the submitted manuscript:

In the abstract (line 38-39):
“…and propose preferred wording which requires contextualization to local language, culture, and environment.”

And again, on line 120 onward:

“As terminology requires adaptation in local languages and cultures, each linguistic and professional community should be engaged in discussing and contextualizing these terms so that they are acceptable in the circumstances they are to be used.”