

Words Matter: The Impact of Stigmatizing Language and Creating Spaces to Advance Language Justice

Sonia Canzater, JD, MPH

Associate Director, Infectious Diseases Initiative

O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law, Georgetown University Law Center

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- In 1925, in *Linder v. United States*, the Supreme Court acknowledged persons addicted to drugs as “diseased”, and “...proper subjects for [medical] treatment”
 - A pivotal case that paved the way for substance use treatments such as MOUD treatment as we know it today
- *Robinson v. State of California* (1962) said that making addiction a crime was “cruel and unusual punishment”, because narcotic addiction is an illness that someone could even acquire “innocently” through use of medically prescribed narcotics (i.e. opioids), or from the moment of birth.

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/268/5/>
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/370/660#fn9>

Substance Use as a Political Pawn



- Became an opportunity to create racial, socio-economic, and regional stratification to operationalize a political and social agenda
- Most people have similar, objective perceptions about treating people with illness
- But framing substance use as a personal choice and a question of morality helped to create lines and opportunities for divisiveness

Language Used to Marginalize and Divide



**Persons with
substance
use disorder**

Using Language to Marginalize and Divide



**We see this
in other
contexts**

“Homeless”

“Persons Experiencing Homelessness”

“Slaves”

“Enslaved persons”

“Prisoners”

“Incarcerated Persons”

“Handicapped”

“Persons with Disabilities” or “Differently Abled
Persons”

Language Used to Marginalize and Divide



- Equates the condition with the person's identity
 - Dehumanizing
 - Demoralizing
- Over time, these categorizations become entrenched in societal perceptions
 - **Implicit bias** - a form of bias that occurs automatically and unintentionally, that nevertheless affects judgments, decisions, and behaviors.
- Creates:
 - Stigma
 - Chilling effect to seek help
 - Exacerbates substance use