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Approaches to Contested In-Group Terminology for Mindful Editors

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Abstract

In the conversation about mindful editing, a conundrum exists with regards to marginalized groups for whom all possible labels to identify the group contain loaded histories and connotations, and different subsets of these marginalized groups are in disagreement about what terminology is most appropriate. This contested in-group terminology places editors in a position where any editorial choice they make has high risk of offending or alienated members of the very group the editor hopes to represent. How, then, do mindful editors approach the matter of *contested in-group terminology* in an ethical manner? This study examines the approaches to contested in-group terminology used by the publishing industry in the past decade, examining word-choice and framing in the back cover copy and titles from three datasets of books featuring characters that belong to the following identity groups: *fat*, *disabled*, and *queer*. The data shows that publishing has been taking different approaches to language for each of these groups and that mindful editors cannot expect one approach to navigating contested in-group terminology to translate easily to other groups. The data also reveals some areas where the publishing industry and readers are in disagreement about appropriate labels for marginalized groups. In order to address contested terminology, mindful editors need to understand the histories of the terminology in question, consider the audience and the author's intention with their word-choice, and research arguments for or against particular word-choice from a variety of in-group sources to make well-reasoned and deliberate choices for terminology and framing.

Introduction

The role of any editor in the publishing process is to help refine a work to ensure that the author's message can be well-understood by their audience. Recent discussion both within and beyond the publishing industry have grappled with matters of language and framing as demands for greater representation for historically marginalized groups grows, and many works are coming under scrutiny for their approaches to these matters. One major complication to this problem for even the most well-intention of authors and editors is that within marginalized groups, there is not always a consensus for the most appropriate language to use when writing about that group. Many identities that have been oppressed, litigated, pathologized, and dehumanized throughout history find that every possible label used to identify them as a group contains its own historical, cultural, and political baggage, and often attempts to create fresh, value-neutral labels meet political resistance from within the groups they are meant to describe

or simply aren't widely-understood enough in their native languages to reasonably use in a published work.

One example of this scenario is language surrounding disability, with multiple terms proposed and used by different groups for which the term "disabled" refers (whether or not the groups in question themselves identify with that particular term). As Erin Andrews et al. note for disability terminology, the different sociological models of disability (medical, moral, and social) that have existed throughout history have an impact on the meaning of disability terminology, depending on which model the author is operating upon (112). A phrase that originated in the medical model of disability, for example, may or may not be appropriate to use in reference to someone's social identity. Differing sociological frameworks and personal philosophies regarding the most appropriate language to describe disabled people by members of the in-group means that out-group members have no language choices available that will please all in-group members. For the purpose of this analysis, I will refer to this phenomenon as *contested in-group terminology*, meaning that the question of preferred terminology is something that is contested by members of the marginalized group the terminology is meant to describe.

The issue of contested in-group terminology extends beyond a simple choice of which label to use for a group—sometimes an editor must consider whether the group should be labelled at all, as the very act of identifying a marginalized group as such sets them apart from privileged groups of their society, which can carry unintended consequences. As Ullrich Zeitler notes regarding Invisible Romas Week in the *Journal of Media Ethics*:

> On the one hand, the marginalized group—in this case the Roma—is in need of attention due to massive discrimination and suppression; on the other hand, any event, such as the Invisible Romas Week, will maintain the marginalized status of the people in case. [...] The very act of addressing the immigrants and refugees contributes to their continued marginalization. (238)

Further, terminology which may seem scientific, descriptive, and neutral may be intertwined with negative stereotypes that derive from a term's linguistic roots; for example, "blind", which is commonly used to describe people with low or no vision (a specific category of disability), derives from an Indo-European term related to confusion, which is also the root phrase for the modern English word "blunder" (Bolt 541). Mindful editors also need to be cognizant that what might seem like common-sense or polite word choice for out-group members talking about a marginalized in-group members may be contentious or rejected language by some members of the group in question. A study by Sarah Trainer et al. on terminology for fat individuals found that college student interviewees (most, but not all, of whom were out-group members to the identity in question) were adverse to describe others as "fat", feeling that it was universally pejorative term. However, all of the interviewees in the study also claimed to have friends who self-described as "fat", though many noted that their friends were not necessarily members of this in-group and used "fat" as a sort of confessional phrase to cope with guilt over making unhealthy lifestyle choices (270). As these interviews show, certain contentious identity terminology can have different uses and connotations to out-group or in-group members, and the distinction between labelling others and self-labelling with a particular phrase can be significant. Andrews et al. note this phenomenon, too, observing in regards to disability terminology such as "differently-abled" or "handicapable":

Such terms are meant to counteract the negative associations of disability by accentuating the strengths of people with disabilities. Despite good intentions, these labels are considered euphemisms in disability culture […] Disability euphemisms are often, although not always, developed by nondisabled people […] Although couched in positive terminology, euphemisms reveal discomfort with disability and reinforce the implication that disability is a negative and undesirable state. (113)

The reason that some terminologies become contested can be the result of multiple historical and cultural factors, and between different groups the exact interaction of factors will not necessarily be the same. The end result for the publishing industry, either way, is that publishing professionals must make choices for how to refer to marginalized groups with the knowledge that whatever choice they make will inevitably alienate or upset a certain amount of members of the groups they are aiming to represent or discuss. Editors concerned with mindful editing should, of course, strive to make the editorial choices that will be respectful and do the most good for the marginalized groups they hope to represent, but when the language to even refer to such groups is so fraught, it can be a challenge to determine what language is uplifting, harmful, or even neutral.

Unfortunately, the matter of contested in-group terminology is so complicated that editors cannot even reliably trust that removing slurs from a piece of writing will universally work as a step in harm reduction to marginalized communities. As Diane Anderson-Minshall wrote in *The Advocate*, while the term "dyke" has a long history as a slur and is still sometimes used by straight men as such, a wholesale banishment of the term can lead to and in some cases has resulted in the erasure of communities and histories of queer women (28), and any identity term that has any history as slur is also at risk of the same consequences should they be absolutely stripped from writings.

Research Question

The solutions to this conundrum are not likely to be straightforward or universally applicable, but in order to get a sense of where editors can improve their approach to this issue, it will be helpful to examine how publishing has addressed this matter in the past. While very few publishers or authors are likely to state publically their reasons for choosing specific marginalized identity terminology—if this was something that they consciously considered at all—I intend to analyze the word-choice used for representations of such groups in the past decade of publishing. My intention for this analysis is to observe trends about what contested in-group terminology is most popular, whether publishing has any apparent consensus about particular contested terms, and what kind of connotations are being attached to which terms. My goal with examining these trends is to find if there is any past insight in publishing with regards to the question of contested in-group terminology: With terminology for the experiences and identities of marginalized groups constantly changing and coming into question, how can editors ethically approach the matter of terminology and framing to use for a group when every available term is contested by certain members that group?

Methodology

In order to examine the approach that editors have taken with regards to the matter of contested in-group terminology in recent years, I have comprised a three-part data corpus to analyze the terminology used for three different marginalized identities over the past decade. The identities in question will be referred to in this analysis in general terms as *fat*, *disabled*, and *queer*, though the analysis will examine other common terms and descriptions for these groups. The source of the data is back cover copy and/or titles for each book included in the data set. It is worth noting that while some back cover copy and titles will have input from authors or editors—especially for self-published titles, which are included in these datasets—it is possible that some samples examined in this corpus may have been crafted by marketing writers who have deviated from the terminology used in the book itself. For the sake of studying a broad range of examples, however, this analysis will assume that the language used in the back cover copy and titles do in fact largely reflect the language used in its respective book.

The parameters for qualifying titles in this dataset are as follows:

- Adult or YA prose fiction titles only
- Published within the past 10 years (2009 or onward)
- Title or back cover copy must refer directly to at least one character's marginalized identity, either by a label or description of the character's experience in that identity. Metadata or book covers that make the identity explicit without accompanying reference in the copy or title do not qualify.

Qualifying titles were found via searching various Goodreads user-aggregated lists that focus on the identity in question, located via Google search with the search phrase "Goodreads list [fat/disabled/queer] protagonist". Titles included do not necessarily reflect all qualifying titles on each list—for some lists, only the first couple of dozen titles were examined, again for the sake of gathering a dataset that is broadly ranging. For each of the identity categories—*fat*, *disabled*, and *queer*—30 titles were collected for analysis.

Once each identity category had 30 titles selected for consideration, their back cover copy and titles were examined for the term(s) used to communicate the identity in question. From there, a tally was taken for each identity category for the terms found among the selected books. This data was coded into 8 categories for each identity: the general terms used in this analysis (fat/disabled/queer), descriptions (rather than explicit labels) of the identity in question, five other common labels per identity, and "Other". Because some back cover copy used multiple terms to describe an identity, the tally for each category counts the total number of types of reference rather than the total number of books examined.

Also recorded was the terminology used by the lists themselves from which the sample titles were sourced. This data reflects the terminology used by Goodreads users rather than editors or other publishing professionals, but this data does provide insight on how the language being used by readers for the purpose of categorization does or does not align with that being used by editors.

This analysis does not assume anything regarding the personal identities of the authors or the editors regarding whether they are in-group or out-group to the identities in question. The intention behind selecting *fat*, *disabled*, and *queer* as the identities to examine—and the use of those three terms in particular—is because those are popular and well-understood identity labels
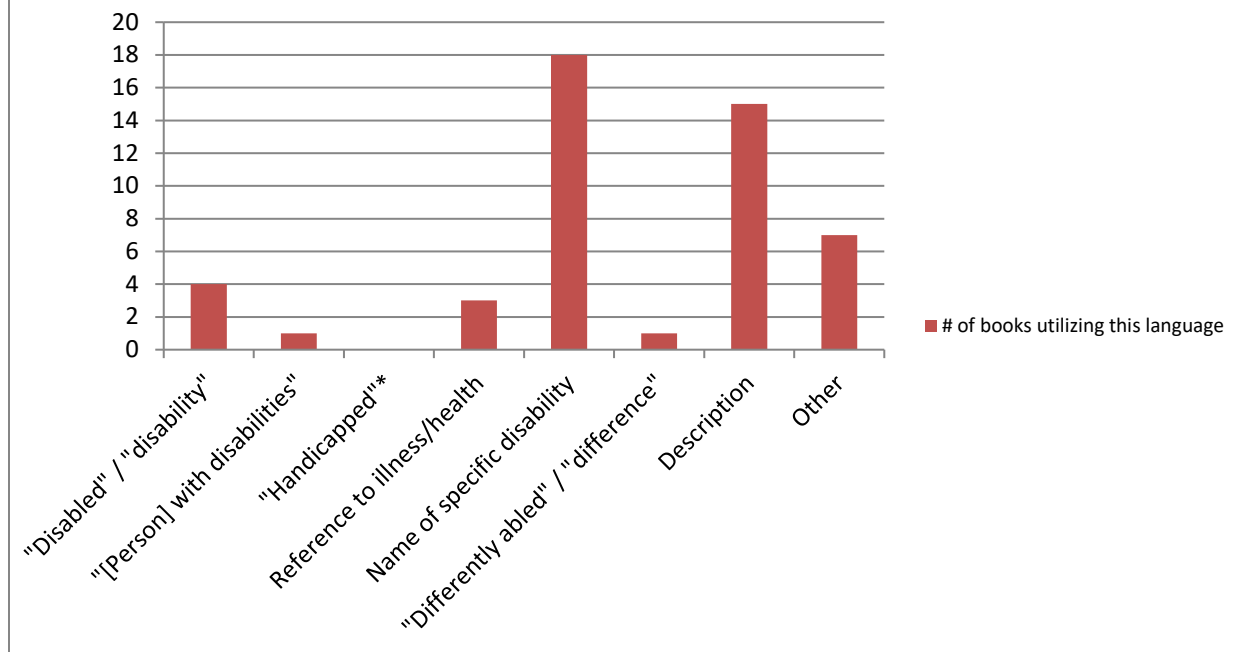
that nevertheless remain controversial and frequently challenged by both in-group and out-group members. The purpose of examining exclusively fiction is because due to the fact that these characters are fictional, it is not possible for them to self-determine which identity terms they personally feel are most appropriate, and for these books authors and editors necessarily made choices themselves about the most appropriate language to use. The decision to create three separate datasets was made with the understanding that different marginalized groups and out-group members writing about them will have different histories, politics, and expectations with their contested in-group terminology, and thusly that conclusions drawn about the terminology popular for one identity may not translate directly to similar conclusions about another. Graphic novels have been excluded from the dataset to focus particularly on how word-choice communicates identity.

Findings
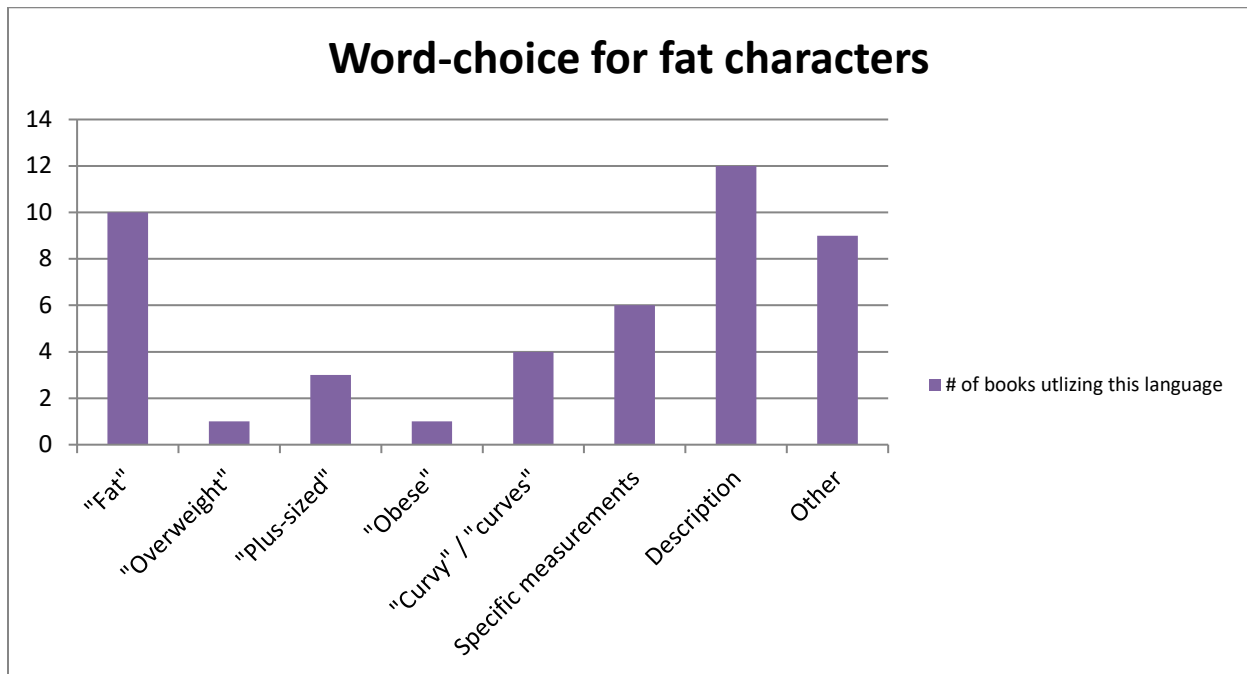
Fat fiction tended to be more broadly ranging in its word-choice than disabled or queer fiction. Characters were commonly identified as "fat", by specific clothing measurements or body weights, and with descriptions of weight loss or body insecurity as plot points. "Curvy", while not as popular across genres, was frequently used among the romance novels in the dataset, and "plus-sized" was used only occasionally. "Overweight" and "obese", perhaps the most traditionally derogatory and medicalizing of the terms being tracked in this analysis, were the least commonly used. Terms that fell into the "Other" category were fairly popular, and included numerous ambiguous terms such as "voluptuous", "heavy", or "big". Some books that were disqualified from this dataset also used the term "big" with no other language or context in the copy that made it explicitly clear that the character in question was fat (as opposed to tall or muscular), but the number of titles disqualified from the dataset for this reason were not tracked.

Word-choice for disabled characters

Bar chart titled "Word-choice for disabled characters" with y-axis from 0 to 20. Categories and values for "# of books utilizing this language":
- "Disabled" / "disability": 4
- "[Person] with disabilities": 1
- "Handicapped"*: 0
- Reference to illness/health: 3
- Name of specific disability: 18
- "Differently abled" / "difference": 1
- Description: 15
- Other: 7

*"handicapped" was used once in reference to a disability-accessible room, but not in reference to any people

For disabled fiction, one of the most popular approaches was to name the specific disabilities of the characters, including for books with multiple disabled characters mentioned in the back cover copy. This approach was more popular than using the term "disability" (either as an adjective or with person-first language), and far more popular than the terms "handicapped", "differently abled" (or variant language with emphasis on difference), or describing disability in terms of illness or health (except insofar as specific disability names originate in the field of medicine and have highly medical connotations). Descriptions of characters' circumstances to identify them as disabled were still popular, as they were for fat and queer fiction, but for disabled fiction labelling specific disabilities was the most common type of reference used by back cover copy, with 18 of the 30 sampled books (60%) utilizing that approach.

Word-choice for queer characters
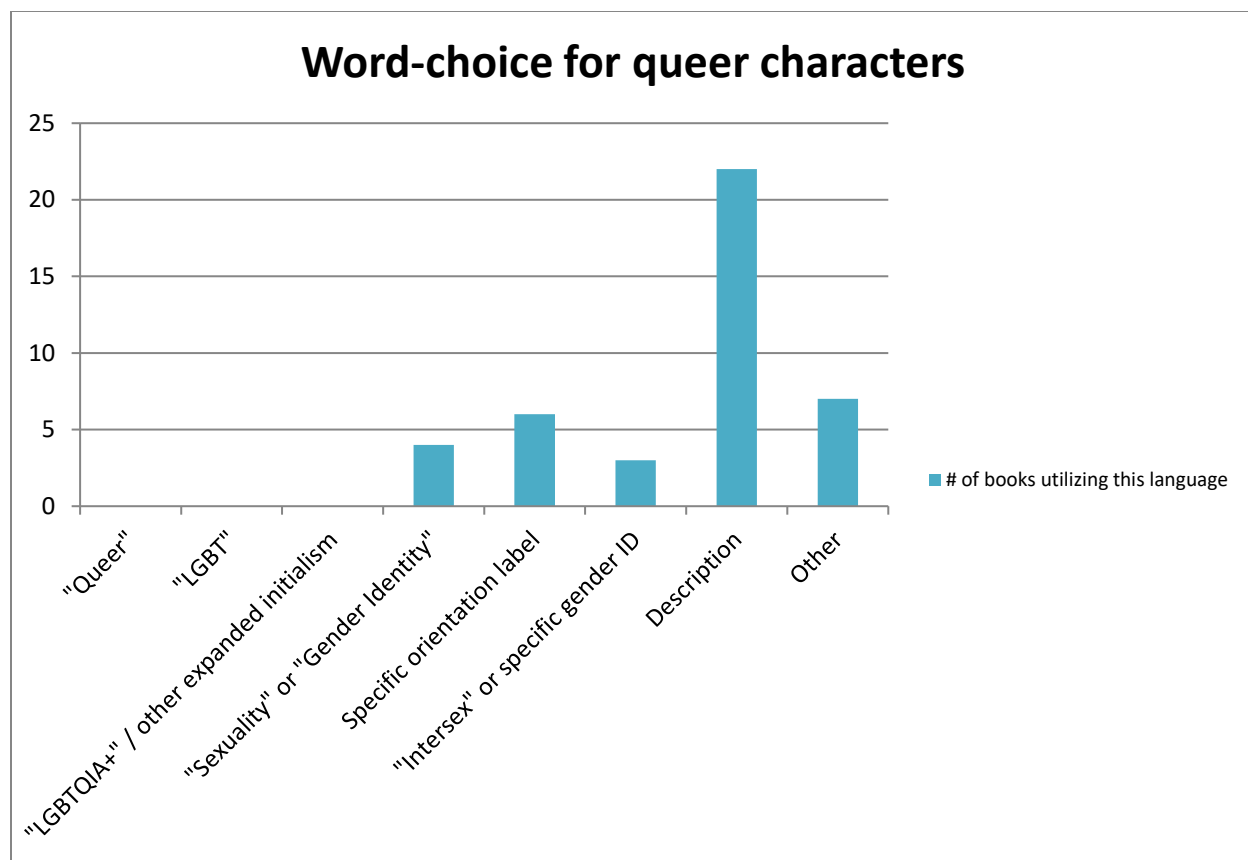
Queer fiction has largely avoided the topic of contested in-group terminology by describing character identities, most often in terms of their relationships with other same-gender characters. 22 of the 30 books examined describe character identities, and of those 22, only 7 also include more specific terminology, meaning 50% of the books examined did not use specific labels in the titles or copy at all. Notably, samples with asexual protagonists were most likely to directly name the character's orientation, even if the asexual protagonist was also described as being a same-gender romantic relationship—of the 6 titles that used specific orientation labels to describe their characters, 3 (50% of titles that used orientation labels) used the term "asexual", although nothing in the dataset suggests that anywhere close to 50% of all the queer titles sampled featured asexual characters.

Considerations for Disqualified Data

Also notable were the amount of queer books disqualified from the dataset (though exact numbers were not recorded as a part of this study) due to the fact that the characters' identities were never explicitly established in the title or back cover copy—rather, the presence of queer characters was indicated by metadata. Perhaps most tellingly was *Call Me By Your Name*, a well-known novel about two gay men that was recently adapted into a popular film, which was disqualified from the dataset due to the fact that no sexual orientation labels were used and only one of the romantic leads had his gender specified in the back cover copy. Again, although the exact numbers of disqualified titles for any of the three identity categories were not recorded as

part of this research, queer titles were disqualified from the dataset for this reason at a much higher frequency than fat or disabled titles.

Contentious Language as Deliberate Emotional Provocation

Of note, a number of fat and disabled books examined for this analysis did engage somewhat with the conversation of appropriate in-group terminology in the back cover copy. Examples include *Ethan, Who Loved Carter*, which plays with the term "debilitating" to describe not the main character's disability (which is instead referred by name), but his shy nature. The copy also refers to Ethan's brain as "damaged" to communicate Ethan's feelings about his own disability and how it affects his self-esteem, and does not appear to be a sincere reflection of the author or editor's personal attitudes toward mental disability. By deliberately evoking derogatory language to describe a disability, the copy is able to communicate plot and characterization elements of the story. Whether this is an ethical approach to communicating a disabled character's identity and their relationship to said identity is one thing for mindful editors to consider.

Teenage Waistland was another book to utilize terminology in what seems to be a deliberately provocative, tongue-in-cheek manner to communicate not only character identities but also their feelings about their identities. In addition to listing specific weights for each character, the copy uses the term "liposuctioned" to disparage a character who received weight-loss surgery, "moobies—male boobies" to mockingly feminize a fat male character, and "morbidly obese and morbid" to describe a character who is both fat and depressed. The copy successfully communicates the self-loathing of the characters being described by utilizing intentionally deprecating phrasing. However, *Teenage Waistland* is the only book in the dataset to utilize the term "obese", and it does so twice—once as mentioned above, and once to describe "severely obese" teens who qualify for a weight-loss surgery trial. The use of "severely obese", which occurs early in the copy, appears to be framed as a value-neutral descriptive phrase, while the second use of "obese" ("morbidly obese and morbid") is clearly meant to insult the character who it describes. The copy of this particular book appears to be of two minds regarding whether "obese" is or is not appropriate in-group terminology.

Queer titles were far less likely than fat or disabled titles to engage in this kind of intentionally depreciating wordplay. While some of the copy in the queer books examined do take a playfully depreciating tone to a character's relationship with their identity itself, there are no examples in this dataset where that kind of deliberately provocative word-choice is used with queer identity terminology.

Publishing Terminology Versus Goodreads User Terminology

Finally, there are a few brief observations about how the language of the Goodreads lists used to find qualifying samples for this dataset match or deviated from the language used in the books themselves. Among queer books, 75% of the Goodreads lists used to source examples included "queer" in their list descriptions, but 0% of the books on those lists that qualified for the dataset included the term "queer" in their titles or back copy. Also notable was that "Queer", "LGBT", and "LGBTQIA+" (or other variations on the expanded initialism), despite being very common terms and frequently used in metadata for books, did not appear in the copy or titles of

any of the books in the dataset. One possible explanation for the initialisms may be because these terms are commonly used as umbrella terms or group descriptors and are very rarely used to describe individuals.

Lists for fat protagonists, on the other hand, largely matched the same trend of varied word-choice seen in the dataset for fat books. Of the 3 Goodreads lists used to collect samples, "Fat", "Overweight", and "Plus-size" were all terms used in the titles and descriptions, with not one list repeating the word-choice used by the others.

Disabled lists similarly were of different minds regarding the most appropriate terminology to use, though the range of word-choice here did not reflect the language used in the examined book copy. "Disabled", "characters with disabilities", and "handicapped" were used, although the "Best Books with Handicapped Hero" did also use "disabled" in its description. Of note, while one list used "handicapped", none of the disabled books sampled used that term in reference to any characters.

Conclusions

In all three identities examined, the trends observed in word-choice vary greatly depending on the identity in question. While there appears to be something of a consensus in publishing that queer characters should have their identities described by their circumstances rather than with specific labels, disabled characters are split fairly evenly between being described and being concisely labelled (and some samples identified disabled characters with both approaches), and fat characters are identified with a broad range of terminology, though more medicalized terms are less popular. As expected, trends in publishing suggest that different marginalized identities have different norms or expectations regarding what kind of terminology is appropriate or not when communicating their identities to readers, to say nothing of whether any of the identity terminology found in the datasets are preferred or not by their in-group members.

These findings complicate one of the most common recommended solutions for the publishing industry to increase mindful editing and improve representation of marginalized groups, which is to hire editors (and other publishing professionals) from a wide range of marginalized demographic backgrounds. While this recommendation still holds water as a common sense solution to increasing diversity in publishing and a solid foundation for addressing contested in-group terminology, the data in this study shows that this approach on its own will not be enough. Editors, regardless of background, will still need to understand that each marginalized community will have its own needs—sometimes internally-conflicting—with language, and the best solution for one group may not apply to another. Assuming that no editor will have such an intersection of identities that they will be able to speak with lived authority on representation and word-choice for every marginalized group, thorough research into the current politics of contested in-group terminology will be a valuable starting point for mindfully editing any project. The question of how to choose appropriate terminology when all choices are problematic remains, but as the examples from the datasets with deliberately derogatory word-choice and framing show, even problematic language can be wielded skillfully by mindful editors who are deliberate with their choices.

As is always the case with language, mindful editors should be considerate of how it can change, is changing, or has changed, and likewise should be wary of utilizing singular sources as ultimate authorities on the meanings or implications of any particular terminology. The benefit of

evolving language, however, is that it is always in conversation, and many publishing professionals are invested and engaged in working to ensure that authors and editors have the resource available to make deliberate, informed, and respectful decisions about their word-choice. Karen Yin's *Conscious Style Guide* is a website devoted to entirely that purpose, including links to articles and glossaries discussing the impact that word-choice has on marginalized communities, many of which (though not all) are produced by in-group members of those communities. Per the *Conscious Style Guide's* mission statement:

> Our mission is to help writers and editors think critically about using language—including words, portrayals, framing, and representation—to empower instead of limit. In one place, you can access style guides covering terminology for various communities and find links to key articles debating usage. We study words so that they can become tools instead of unwitting weapons. (Lin)

It is still possible that many of these sources linked by the *Conscious Style Guide* will contradict one another in what is the most appropriate terminology for any given group, so the responsibility for making the best terminology choice will still fall on mindful editors and authors, but resources do exist to help them make that choice with as much information and context as possible. As the *Conscious Style Guide* itself notes:

> Conscious language is the art of using words effectively in a specific context. Who is your audience? What tone and level of formality do you want? What are you trying to achieve? Some words are more apt than others. […] The goal is not to be inoffensive or politically correct (whatever that means), because even language intended to be inclusive and considerate can be received the wrong way. (Lin)

Many disabled communities are already using their labels contextually in this manner to convey different connotations and achieve separate goals in different scenarios. In a study by David Thomas and Dennis Gregory that examined preferred terminology for Deaf/deaf individuals, the study finds:

> The discussion of *disability* and its interaction with Deaf identity revealed four major categories of identity and association: participants outright rejected the classification of *disability* as pejorative; participants rejected *disability* as inaccurate and constructed *disability* as a trait of the other […]; participants accepted *disability* but still constructed their Deaf identity in opposition to the social construct of *disability*; and participants accepted *disability* only insofar as it provided for rights and protections under the law. (132)

Research done by Tove Lundberg et al. found something similar among intersex individuals. In Lundberg's study, two in-group members noted that they used both "intersex" and "DSD" (Disorders of Sexual Development) for themselves depending on whether the context is social or medical, and Lundberg also noted that the popularity of the term "intersex" among study participants seemed to be impacted by whether or not the participant was particularly involved with or educated on existing intersex (self-

labelled as such) communities (167). The considerations of context such as immediate circumstances, legal or medical ramifications, personal history, or education for the marginalized person or character being labelled are things for editors to examine when making their word-choice decisions.

Also vital for editors to keep in mind is how marginalized identities can interact with one another. Shimizu Akiko writes specifically on how certain identity labels do not always translate cross-culturally, using the example that in Japan, often a woman who is referred to as a lesbian "is considered to be not genuinely Japanese" (509). Depending on the ideas about lesbian or Japanese identities that the author intends to communicate, certain terminology choices could entirely shift the implications and meaning of the author's message, and that message might be received very differently by different audiences.

The end-goal for mindful editors should not be purely to avoid outdated, unintentionally condescending, or even brazenly offensive word-choice when describing marginalized groups. As the example of *Ethan, Who Loved Carter* showed, deliberately provocative use of identity language can help communicate more than just a character's identity to the reader, which is important in writing marginalized characters as fully-realized, emotionally-complex people. And as the example of *Teenage Waistland* showed, that provocation can land poorly when careless editors try to play the same identity phrase as simultaneously outrageous and value-neutral, with little apparent respect to why some fat readers might take issue with the terminology used.

Given the shifts of language and culture, the internal politics surrounding terminology by in-group members of marginalized communities, and the potentially international audience that a book might reach, editors will never find terminology to described marginalized identities that is wholly unproblematic to every member of that identity group. It is their responsibility, instead, to make well-reasoned, educated, and compassionate choices using the information and arguments available from various in-group members and consider the audience and the author's goals to select terminology and framing purposefully.

Process and Acknowledgements

This research is an extension of a paper written as part of Dr. Rachel Noorda's Book Editing course at Portland State University in Spring 2018. The original research paper, titled *Ethical Editorial Approaches to Contested Identity Terminology*, examined the current conversation in publishing spheres regarding contested in-group terminology and the matter of contested terminology in a more general sense. My goal with this current research paper was to move beyond identifying the issue and its impact on publishing and instead focus more on the practical ways in which publishing has so far addressed the topic and could potentially approach it in the future.

My interest in this topic was spurred largely by conversations in social justice spheres, particularly in queer and disability advocacy, and I owe an acknowledgment to the many, many individuals in these communities discussing both among themselves and with out-group members the implications of identity word choice. I also owe a thanks to Dr. Rachel Noorda for advising me on both of these research papers, as well as my graduate committee members Dr. Kathi Berens and Kelley Dodd for their feedback on my research and conversing with me about practical ways to apply my findings in my publishing work going forward.

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