

WHY I DISLIKE “PERSON FIRST” LANGUAGE



Autism Network International

October 28, 2013

By Jim Sinclair

Abstract:

Originally published on the authors web site in 1999 this article still provides an antidote to the often prescribed use of people first language. The article belongs in *Autism* as a constant source of reference to all future authors and subscribers.

Why I dislike “Person First” language

By Jim Sinclair

I am not a “person with autism.” I am an autistic person. Why does this distinction matter to me?

1) Saying “person with autism” suggests that the autism can be separated from the person. But this is not the case. I can be separated from things that are not part of me, and I am still be the same person. I am usually a “person with a purple shirt,” but I could also be a “person with a blue shirt” one day, and a “person with a yellow shirt” the next day, and I would still be the same person, because my clothing is not part of me. But autism is part of me. Autism is hard-wired into the ways my brain works. I am autistic because I cannot be separated from how my brain works.

2) Saying “person with autism” suggests that even if autism is part of the person, it isn’t a very important part. Characteristics that are recognized as central to a person’s identity are appropriately stated as adjectives, and may even be used as nouns to describe people: We talk about “male” and “female” people, and even about “men” and “women” and “boys” and “girls,” not about “people with maleness” and “people with femaleness.” We describe people’s cultural and religious identifications in terms such as “Russian” or “Catholic,” not as “person with Russianity” or “person with Catholicism.” We describe important aspects of people’s social roles in terms such as “parent” or “worker,” not as “person with offspring” or “person who has a job.” We describe important aspects of people’s personalities in terms such as “generous” or “outgoing,” not person first language as “person with generosity” or “person with extroversion.” Yet autism goes deeper than culture and learned belief systems. It affects how we relate to others and how we find places in society. It even affects how we relate to our own bodies. If I did not

have an autistic brain, the person that I am would not exist. I am autistic because autism is an essential feature of me as a person.

3) Saying “person with autism” suggests that autism is something bad—so bad that it isn’t even consistent with being a person. Nobody objects to using adjectives to refer to characteristics of a person that are considered positive or neutral. We talk about left-handed people, not “people with left-handedness,” and about athletic or musical people, not about “people with athleticism” or “people with musicality.” We might call someone a “blue-eyed person” or a “person with blue eyes,” and nobody objects to either descriptor. It is only when someone has decided that the characteristic being referred to is negative that suddenly people want to separate it from the person. I know that autism is not a terrible thing, and that it does not make me any less a person. If other people have trouble remembering that autism doesn’t make me any less a person, then that’s their problem, not mine. Let them find a way to remind themselves that I’m a person, without trying to define an essential feature of my personhood as something bad. I am autistic because I accept and value myself the way I am.

[Jim Sinclair.](#)