



UNCOMMONLAW

WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS



Language and Prisons

“A barrier we face trying to dismantle the prison industrial complex (PIC) is we continue to use the language that helped build it.” - Emile DeWeaver, former UnCommon Law client



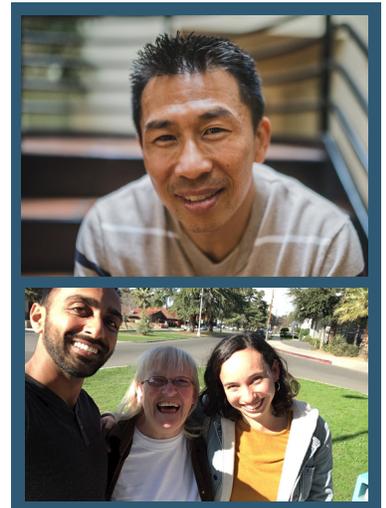
UnCommon Law’s work is predicated on the idea that those who have committed crimes are in no way fundamentally different or less human than those who have not. To this end, we believe that prisons and the Prison Industrial Complex exist and are fueled by a social process of “othering.” “Othering” occurs when we create social distinctions between an elevated “us” (greater society) and a less-human “them” (incarcerated people).

Language forms the fabric of our society: through language, we create meanings that affect all social interactions. Words like “prisoner,” “inmate,” “offender,” or “criminal,” carry strong, negative social meaning and implicit biases and assumptions. When we use only these words to identify incarcerated people, we inevitably replace that person’s identity with the singular, negative meaning those words carry, and ignore or obliterate any of that individual’s positive or complex qualities. As Emile DeWeaver writes,

Hundreds of thousands of people in prison have many positive qualities, but our current language excludes them from conversation. Words like “prisoner” create a false reality that corrupts public thought about incarceration, reform and public safety. (DeWeaver, “The Right Words Can Help Tear Down The Prison System”)

This matters because language reinforces existing social norms, attributes positive and negative values to various identities, and has the power to humanize or dehumanize entire groups of people. The PIC and our society’s overreliance on incarceration is enabled by the language we use to dehumanize incarcerated populations, in which communities of color and poor communities are overrepresented.

UnCommon Law believes in the intrinsic human value of all people, including and especially the incarcerated communities we serve. Words like “prisoner” and “inmate” are fully incompatible with a humanizing approach. Because of this core value, we are making a conscious attempt to remove that language from our daily speech and all organizational rhetoric. When working with people who have experienced or are currently experiencing incarceration, our focus is on the complex, unique, human identity, and our terminology must reflect that.



Language and Gender Identity

UnCommon Law believes firmly in the right of all people to shape and hold their own, individual identities. We understand the difference between gender and sex as the following: sex is the biological identity assigned at birth based on reproductive organs, and gender is the identity each individual person feels and identifies for themselves. GLAAD (previously known as the “Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation”) explains, “Gender identity is a person’s internal, personal sense of being a man or a woman (or boy or girl.) For some people, their gender identity does not fit neatly into those two choices.” (GLAAD, “Transgender FAQ”)



“Pronouns” refer to the gender identity a given individual self-identifies with. Gender and sex are often linked in the construction of identity, but do not always “match” according to social binary norms. As Dr. Jeanie Austin writes:

Pronouns are often used by individuals who are gender non-conforming, gender-neutral, nonbinary, or genderqueer...becoming familiar with the use of pronouns and the concepts behind pronoun usage will create opportunities for more adroit dialogue and removes the burden of explanation from individual nonbinary people. (Austin, “They/Them Pronouns Tutorial”)



To learn more about gender identity and the importance of using correct pronouns, please feel free to utilize the following resources:

Everyone in our organization and community deserves the right to live their truth as they self-identify it, and to do so without fear or judgment. In order to help build a society where gender identity is acknowledged as fluid and always respected, we share our own gender pronouns with each other and our community. We understand that making these adjustments to language may be difficult for those to whom this concept is new, but we encourage our community to do their best in joining us to respect the pronouns a given individual asks you to refer to them by.

<https://www.colorado.edu/cisc/resources/transgender/pronouns>

<https://www.glaad.org/transgender/transfaq>

<https://www.seventeen.com/life/a12095244/heres-why-gender-pronouns-are-so-important/>

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/talking-about-pronouns-in-the-workplace>

<https://jeanieaustin.com/they-them-pronouns-module/>

https://sfpl.bibliocommons.com/item/show/3562456093?active_tab=bib_info

Sources:

“Transgender FAQ.” GLAAD, <https://www.glaad.org/transgender/transfaq>. Austin, Jeanie.

“They/Them Pronouns FAQ.” Dr. Jeanie Austin, <https://jeanieaustin.com/they-them-pronouns-module/>.

DeWeaver, Emile. “The Right Words Can Help Tear down the Prison System.” San Francisco Bay View, 23 May 2019, <https://sfbayview.com/2017/09/the-right-words-can-help-tear-down-the-prison-system/>.