



Racism and Workforce Development: A Series

Between the Lines: Bias, Myth, and Blame in the Narratives and Language of Workforce Development

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Structural racism has been described as the most profound and pervasive form of racism, because it is complex, it intersects with all the systems and structures in our society, and it is invisible.¹

Language and narrative are similarly powerful, as they can be linchpins in the propagandistic spread of racism and the ideology of white supremacy or tools amplifying messages and ideals of equity. While not necessarily invisible, words are often used casually or thoughtlessly. Whether used unconsciously or with intent, language and narrative influence employers, shape policy, and affect funding allocations in the workforce development ecosystem.

The workforce development ecosystem supports unemployed, underemployed, and dislocated workers. For practitioners in this and similar service fields, the core competencies and hallmarks of professionalism include respectful, tactful, and sensitive speech and writing. Yet the industry continues to employ language that demeans and stigmatizes people who seek training, employment, and economic advancement.

Pause a moment and listen for the judgment embedded in commonly used terms referring to citizens in workforce programs: “low-skilled worker,” “marginalized people,” “unemployable candidate,” “at-risk population.” Sometimes, these terms originate in well-intentioned attempts at polite or race-neutral expression. More often, used as labels, the terms achieve an opposite effect: they stigmatize, especially when used to describe Black, indigenous, and non-Black people of color (BIPOC), immigrants, and groups not traditionally included in portrayals of upward mobility.

This language reinforces negative stereotypes by categorizing citizens and communities as broken, troubled, lesser, “othered,” in need of rescue or rehabilitation, or unworthy of economic advancement.

When used as shorthand identifiers, these terms fail to acknowledge a person's abilities, assets, integrity, honor, and humanity.

Why do offensive and often racist labels endure despite industry pledges to uphold inclusion, equity, and respect? This *Workforce Currents* article explores why the sector still upholds racism by failing to use non-stigmatizing and anti-racist language.

Narratives reinforcing bias in workforce development language

Unfortunately, workforce development language tends to uphold the myth of meritocracy — the ideology that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough. It presumes that job candidates are wholly responsible for “pulling themselves up by the bootstraps” while ignoring that they are being pushed down by systemic inequities such as occupational segregation, underfunded schools, and inadequate health care. To brand a community as marginalized implies residents fail to strive for good-paying jobs: their circumstances are their fault.

This stereotype, as do other myths and stereotypes, supports the American ideology of white supremacy, which assigns racial “winners and losers” and reinforces beliefs and biases about who has skills, who is deserving, and who is valued. Even programs billed as predominantly “race neutral” yield inequitable outcomes for BIPOC workers, a well-documented and continuing harm caused by structural racism and not by any trait of those citizens.²

Derogatory workforce language may have historical roots in the propaganda of the American system of slavery, which demeaned people to justify the inhumanity of enslavement. “Language not only expresses ideas and concepts, but it may actually shape them,” writes Haig A. Bosmajian, author of *The Language of Oppression*. “Language can thus become an instrument of both propaganda and indoctrination for a given idea.”³

Bosmajian quotes the Harlem Writers Guild and Black Arts Movement novelist, activist, and commentator John Oliver Killens, who observed in 1964: “In order to justify slavery in a courageous new world which was spouting slogans of freedom and equality and brotherhood, the enslavers, through their propagandists, had to create a fiction that the enslaved people were subhuman and undeserving of human rights and sympathies.”⁴

Simply put, language can be used to liberate or to oppress, to reinforce harmful narratives, or to challenge systemic inequity. Language and ideologies work hand in glove.

In her book, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, Robin J. DiAngelo describes racism as a system. She explains that the system begins with ideology, which refers to the big ideas that are reinforced throughout society.⁵ **How are big ideas reinforced through a society? Through language and narrative.**

Therein lies the danger of using stigmatizing labels without thought about their impact.

The tightrope walk of talking about skills

In the workforce field, discourse about skills often emphasizes deficiencies, specifically a worker's lack of skills or an industry's shortage of skilled workers. The skills discussion rarely acknowledges employers' lack of investment in workers to equip them with needed skills. Yet there are shared expectations that workers must have these skills, and there are judgments and consequences if they don't. Typically, the workers are portrayed as the problem.

"Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than policy," writes Ibram X. Kendi in his best-seller, *How to Be an Antiracist*.⁶

The skills discussion is a valid one because we all need skills, but if we are going to discuss "skills," we should first honor existing skills and second include historical context, specifically acknowledging the myth of meritocracy (advancement based on "merit or skill") in the workforce field and the harms of systemic racism and white supremacist ideology (which reinforce the false notion that skills are biological and determined by race) in American business and society.

Furthermore, reducing BIPOC workers' experience to a value judgment about the rung in the work ladder they are trying to climb beyond overlooks their ingenuity, intellect, and talent. Arguably, many are among the most skilled workers of all, as they excel at navigating a societal and economic context designed to leave them out and keep them oppressed. Systems that do not recognize their talents, assets, values, resourcefulness, ambition, dignity, problem-solving ability, and humanity frame them as unemployable, low-skilled, underserved, and marginalized. Implicit in this narrative: the system casts itself as the savior, while essential supports needed to advance (livable wages, health benefits, childcare, high-quality education, job safety, mentors, access to opportunity) are withheld.

The language may seem harmless. Yet every time employers, funders, policy makers, and workforce practitioners use it, the words reinforce the deficit-based narratives that blame people for systemic failures. Whether intentional or not, using these terms regularly reinforces negative stereotypes about BIPOC job candidates. **Such labels — repeated casually or without thinking — affect our beliefs, fuel our biases, inform our practices and policies and uphold cultural racism.**

There is a difference between *labeling people* (which is a function of the system of racism) and describing what people need to advance economically and educationally (which honors their humanity and names a need at the same time). Often, this is where the line blurs and the workforce field is complicit in blaming the people it serves for the deficiencies of the system.

As economic policy writer Annie Lowrey declared in a recent commentary for the *Atlantic*, "Describing American workers as low-skill also vaults over the discrimination that creates these 'low-skill' jobs and pushes certain workers to them. And it positions American workers as being the problem, rather than American labor standards, racism and sexism, and social and educational infrastructure. It is a cancerous little phrase, *low-skill*. As the pandemic ends and the economy reopens, we need to leave it behind."⁷

Narratives about responsibility

A narrative of personal responsibility also pervades workforce development language and policymaking. It has become so normalized in the human service sector that it appears in the name of workforce-oriented policy, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996. This narrative says, “It’s your fault you are poor” and “You are responsible for your barriers.” It blames individuals for perceived failings without acknowledging the system of social and economic oppression hobbling their efforts to advance. In this way, the narrative of personal responsibility upholds the myth of meritocracy, and together they disregard the role and power of racism in life outcomes.

Grant-funding applications often ask workforce practitioners to “state the problem” their programs address. These problem statements often reveal the deeply held and pervasive narratives of “poor individual choices,” yet again blaming the individual and ignoring the impact of systemic, structural, and institutional racism in the individual’s life. The answers invariably cast workforce organizations and philanthropists in the role of saviors or heroes that give and receive money to “fix people.”

Workforce practitioners have the power to influence the economic fate of a large swath of the nation’s citizens, including members of demographic groups that will soon be the majority of the population. Training programs stand as gatekeepers at the doors of many entry-level jobs and determine who is “employable versus unemployable,” who is “deserving” of services, which skills qualify as valid, and who is “job ready.” When workforce practitioners fail to critically examine the language they use, they negate their responsibility and deny their power to either reinforce harmful stereotypes or fundamentally shift them.

Reading between the lines

Coded language substitutes seemingly race-neutral terms for the words and phrases that name racial identity. Common terms used across the workforce field include urban, underprivileged, diverse, low-income, at-risk, marginalized, underserved, and even opportunity youth. Sometimes they and them are used not as pronouns but to generalize or to identify a demographic group. The speaker may believe that these terms are polite or politically correct. The intent of the word choice may be to avoid saying Black or Latinx or poor, but the impact is color blindness, race neutrality, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes.

Furthermore, coded language is used to maintain plausible deniability. The euphemisms allow the speaker to escape the responsibility of perpetuating racist stereotypes because the words don’t name an individual or group’s race or ethnicity. Coded language has become so commonplace in our vernacular that we don’t challenge what the terms may mean and what ideas they may reinforce. In this way, coded language then becomes subtle racial cues, defined as “prejudice-relevant signals in the environment that largely determine whether an event is perceived or experienced as being race-relevant.”⁸ What begins as an attempt to be “politically correct” actually upholds racism and becomes a driver of inequity.

The message and the messenger: toward intentional language in support of racial equity

Although it may seem tempting to draft a quick-fix glossary of new labels, to do so would skip an essential step and risk re-creating the problem. (Think about this: would “historically excluded” be more accurate and appropriate in your community than “marginalized?” The answer may differ by place, organization, and industry.) Therefore, to move toward racial equity and away from being a conduit for racism, workforce development practitioners can no longer blindly accept blame-and-shame narratives and coded terminology as truths. We must critically interrogate every single term we use. We must ask ourselves these questions:

- 1) In what ways do our practices and investments, consciously or unconsciously, emanate from the narratives we accept?
- 2) As practitioners, do we invest less than needed in fixing a broken system because we have convinced ourselves the problem is broken people — the very people the ecosystem exists to uplift?
- 3) Does our language match our ideals?
- 4) Who benefits from the way we frame workforce stories?
- 5) What do the words imply?
- 6) What narrative is workforce jargon perpetuating?
- 7) How could our words be harmful?
- 8) Who or what are the words blaming?
- 9) How can I honor the humanity in people when I write or speak about them?

This is not an exhaustive list of questions. It is a starting point for examination. And while I’m a strong proponent of critical examination, let’s not become stuck there. The examination needs to lead to a completely new narrative and language that supports equitable storytelling in the workforce field. Our stories must honor workers and learners, uplift and empower, disrupt the status quo, name systemic racism boldly and unapologetically where it exists, and align with the equity values that we say we hold. The message must support the racially equitable outcomes we say we want to achieve.

“When we tell the stories of the people we serve, we are creating people in the imagination of our audiences and contributing to their existing biases, narratives, opinions, and ideas about the people in the story,” wrote Abesha Shiferaw, program director of the Rainier Valley Corps, a Seattle nonprofit that develops emerging leaders and builds capacity within communities of color. “We have to acknowledge this power. Words have power. Stories have power. They can be revelations for change or destruction.”⁹

This article is the second in a five-part series that examines manifestations of racism within the language, services, policies, employer relations, and funding in the field of workforce development. [Read the introductory article here.](#) In the next article, we will examine how we can strive for equity in workforce service delivery and program design.

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¹ See “structural racism” defined in [Racial Equity Tools Glossary](#), RacialEquityTools.org.

² Minson, Clair Watson. (2021, February 19). “[The Workforce Development Field or a Conduit for Maintaining Systemic Racism?](#)” Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta *Workforce Currents* .

³ Bosmajian, Haig A. (1983). *The Language of Oppression*. Lanham, Maryland : University Press of America .

⁴ Killens, John Oliver. (1964, June 7). “[Explanation of the ‘Black Psyche.’](#)” *The New York Times*.

⁵ DiAngelo, Robin J. (2018). *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁶ Kendi, Ibram X. (2019). *How to Be an Antiracist*. New York: One World/Random House.

⁷ Lowery, Annie. (2021, April 23). “[Low-Skill Workers Aren’t a Problem to Be Fixed.](#)” *The Atlantic*.

⁸ Hoggard, Lori S., Shawn C. T. Jones, Robert M. Sellers. (2016) Racial Cues and Racial Identity: Implications for How African Americans Experience and Respond to Racial Discrimination. *Journal of Black Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798416651033> Hoggard, et al, attribute the definition to Inman, M. L., Baron, R. S. (1996). Influence of prototypes on perceptions of prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 727-739. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.70.4.727 Major, B., Quinton, W. J., Schmader, T. (2003). Attributions to discrimination and self-esteem: Impact of group and situational ambiguity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 39, 220-231. doi:10.1016/S0022-1031(02)00547-4

⁹ Shiferaw, Abesha. (2018, August 23). “ [How to Tell Compelling Stories while Avoiding Savior Complex and Exploitation .](#)” NTEN.org.