AMMPARO

Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities

Words Create Worlds

Reflection Guide

Use this reflection guide by AMMPARO (Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation, and Opportunities) from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) to explore the power of language in shaping perceptions on migration. Learn tips to inspect words and their potential impact.

Background

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched with Dr. King in Selma, was known to say the phrase "words create worlds." His daughter, Susannah Heschel, remembers the full quote:

> "Words, he often wrote, are themselves sacred, God's tool for creating the universe, and our tools for bringing holiness — or evil — into the world. He used to remind us that the Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with uttering evil words, with defamation, with language and propaganda. Words create worlds, he used to tell me when I was a child. They must be used very carefully. Some words, once having been uttered, gain eternity and can never be withdrawn. The Book of Proverbs reminds us, he wrote, that death and life are in the power of the tongue."--Susannah Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 1997.

As we answer the call of sanctuary, we commit to paying attention to the ways words can bring forth life and take life away. We unveil the ways language upholds unjust systems and structures. We notice who frames the conversation around immigration and accompany one another using words that bring us closer toward a shared horizon of justice, peace and life.

Words Create Worlds

Reflection Guide

Whose Words Do We Center?

It is the faithful call of people of faith to lovingly seek to frame issues of oppression in a way that puts the dignity and humanity of marginalized communities at the center. People who are affected by the systems we are wrestling with should get to define the story and words that are used to speak about their community. On immigration issues, immigrants themselves (people who hold the pain, joy, suffering, etc. of an unjust immigration system) should frame and guide the conversation. While it seems natural that people affected by unjust systems should be centered, historically, people who see immigrants as "others," or allies with a deep desire to shift the thinking of anti-immigrant communities, often frame immigration conversations.

Example: Dreamers

During the push to pass the Dream Act in 2007, people hoping to pass the legislation often said that Dreamers should be given a pathway to citizenship because "they should not suffer for the sins of their parents." As the Dreamer movement became stronger and Dreamers themselves began to lead the conversation about the passage of the bill, they often spoke about how dehumanizing this framing was to their parents. Dreamers' parents often sacrificed their lives to give their children a better one, and it hurt families to criminalize their parents. When Dreamers are centered in the conversation about the Dream Act, it becomes clear that words used to dehumanize their parents are painful and an alternative framing needs to be cultivated.

Example: Illegal vs Legal

One word that is often used by people to refer to immigrants is "illegal." The anti-immigrant movement often makes the argument that this term is the most accurate way to refer to immigrants without current legal state authorization to live in the United States. While language is often attributed to accuracy, this approach can be used to dehumanize the immigrant community, especially when used without context or an understanding of the systems and humans behind the use of the term. While many of us have done things that may be against law (like speeding, driving while intoxicated, etc.), depending on our background, we may or may not have our entire identity defined by that act.

Reflection Questions

What are words that people use to dehumanize each other in your community?

Who does referring to immigrants as "illegal" center?

What are the implications of using "illegal" to refer to immigrant communities?

Words Accompanied by Action

In the wake of tragedy, we've often heard people in power use the phrase "____community are in my thoughts and prayers." While the sentiment is heartfelt, it can diminish the call to accompany our words with actions, particularly actions that might prevent further tragedy. When engaging in the work of immigrant justice and sanctuary, our words must be accompanied by actions.

Reflection Questions

When immigration flashpoints arise or reach the headlines in the wake of tragedy, what immigrant-led organizations can you join in action?

Words of Impact

Words are not static like numbers on a page —this fact about words makes them powerful implements and full of potential. Words are rich with history and prejudices, which makes their deliberate use (and misuse) so critical. Throughout American history, words have been used as instruments to maintain social hierarchies and unjust systems. Just as words have been weaponized to marginalize and alienate the other, they can also be purposeful and reclaimed. The terms and labels we use to refer to others especially matter. Respecting how people identify themselves can be a part of our commitment to justice and solidarity with the oppressed.

Reflection Questions

What do you think words are?
Do you think words are positive and original things in themselves?
What impact do our words have on attitudes and narratives about immigrants?

"Words are not original and arbitrary in themselves. Words are a result—they are the progeny of what has been or is in vogue."

-Walt Whitman

Words Create Worlds

Reflection Guide

Tips for Analyzing Words

1

Who is the framer?

In conversations about oppression, ask yourself: Who is using different words or framing? How do each person's life experiences, profession, etc., impact the way they frame an issue? Are we dehumanizing anyone in the language?

2

What is the framer's intent?

Even sources that we trust or see as authorities use dehumanizing words and framing. It is useful to notice or always ask where the framing of certain issues came from, who it centers and whether you notice differences between the way these sources speak about an issue and affected communities do.

3

What is the group's preference?

Communities are not monolithic: Different communities may have different preferences about terms or framing for specific issues. This is why words themselves must be accompanied by relationships. Do you notice that different communities prefer different terms although they share similar traits? Always defer to what the people you are in a relationship with prefer when speaking to them.

Tell us how you used this guide!

✉ raed.abujries@elca.org

ⓘ ELCA.org/AMMPARO

Special thanks to the
Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice
for preparing the contents of this resource.