

What's in a Name

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Someone who worked with me years ago once explained why she called me James instead of Jim like so many others did. She said that a name was an identity with power and being just like the physical person and it was not meant to be altered or trivialized. Calling someone other than their name, she explained, did not show respect for that person and their full being. Now, we were only talking here about a nickname for James, but it made sense especially if the intent was to diminish or reduce someone by calling them a name.

There are many who have expressed their sentiment that if we as a profession could simply stop the name-calling, the labeling of each other, and/or the denigration that typically goes with these activities, then we could have a much more unified or peaceful profession. I can agree that bad-mouthing will not help us. I wonder though whether that is what is always being done. I personally feel that the terms mixer and straight are quite appropriate to describe the two major concepts or groups within our profession. They were originally coined to describe the fundamental and most important way the two groups differed. So, why all the fuss over a name?

Unfortunately, these names have certain associations for us as chiropractors. Historically, I believe, it was something of a put-down if a straight chiropractor referred to another chiropractor as a mixer. It goes back to D.D. Palmer, I believe, when he was asked about whether he would consider combining chiropractic and medicine in one catch-all health care service, he responded with something like, "No, thank you, I don't mix my chiropractic with anything else; I practice it straight." The terms mixing and straight were coined in this phrase to distinguish different approaches or outlooks on the way chiropractic was practiced; they've survived to the present today. In that it came directly from the founder of the profession, it seemed to be a rather authoritative that, for Palmer at least, straight was the better of the two practices. Thus, identifying someone as a mixer became an indignity and was widely used as such. There are still many who would exploit the term this way.

Of course the mixing chiropractors were not insensitive to this. I've rarely known a chiropractor to refer to himself as a mixer. In fact, I have only heard it twice: one of those times just happened this week when a student in his last term at one of the colleges used the term mixing to describe the kind of practice philosophy he had and the kind of situation he was looking for upon graduation.

There have been occasional efforts to use other descriptions instead, such as therapeutic chiropractic or chiropractic medicine, which may be a bit more palatable for some of the liberal mixers but offensive to the conservative mixers who disdain anything remotely resembling medical terminology. The terms such as "scientific chiropractic" or "progressive chiropractic" have also been tried. These haven't worked because there's nothing unscientific about straight chiropractic and it has not stagnated.

Alternatively, there have been attempts to re-name straight chiropractic. I have heard references to the fringe, cult or splinter group, or the religious fanatics, as examples of mixer terminology for

straights. It is easily understandable why these terms will not ease the straight/mixer tensions. In many ways though, I believe it sensitizes straights to the mixers' objection to what they feel to be derogatory; and apparently they don't like being called mixers any more than straights like being called cultists.

I have always been an advocate of the live-and-let-live attitude among chiropractors. I think that those who believe that name-calling is detrimental are correct. Perhaps the profession should work on this. As I said earlier, I believe the terms mixer and straight are accurate to describe the most significant difference between factions; I also believe that if that is something that is going to polarize and aggravate the division, then it should be corrected. There must be some language that we can all agree upon to effectively handle this difficulty. Let the mixers come up with their own name and the straights with theirs, as long as they don't connote some superiority or implicitly denigrate the other.

So, what's in a name? Not just our identities, but maybe a brighter future for our profession as well.

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