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What's in a Name?

Stephen Langendorfer, Editor

Periodically I hear complaints resisting calls to modify the use of language. Occasionally, critics dismiss a call for altering terms simply as “political correctness.” Personally, I think dismissing too quickly a suggestion to substitute terms with the “PC” label indicates a sad unwillingness to wrestle with complex concerns and issues. It may even represent one’s reluctance to see an issue through someone else’s eyes, which of course is challenging and requires difficult critical thinking skills.

Why am I writing about this issue in an aquatic journal, of all places? Over the past several years, as I have worked with authors on reviewing, editing, and improving papers for publication in the *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education (IJARE)*, I realized that the choice of appropriate terminology often has been an ongoing discussion issue. Most authors have been very willing to accept alternative terms, assuming I provide a reasonable explanation and rationale. On a few occasions, authors have “pushed back,” although only in the most respectful and collegial fashion, which I sincerely appreciate. As I mentioned in the introduction, sometimes the authors’ alternative explanation or citation of authority has been convincing, and I have acquiesced. On other occasions, I find myself “sticking to my guns” (or at least my preferences). Sometimes I have threaded a middle path, allowing an author their choice, because, after all, I remind myself, the paper and its style is the author’s intellectual property.

Drowning Terminology

If I may, let me provide a simple aquatic example. At the World Conference on Drowning in 2002, the gathered conferees recommended to the International Life Saving Federation (ILSF) that the various and confusing terms associated with drowning be thereafter dropped and restricted to a simple definition: “Drowning is the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid. Drowning outcomes are classified as death, morbidity, and no morbidity” (WHO, 2003, p. 2). These terms were meant to replace terms such as *near drowning*, *wet drowning* (i.e., presence of water in the lungs of a deceased individual), *dry drowning* (i.e., deceased individual whose lungs did not contain significant fluid after being recovered from submersion), and other confusing or poorly defined words.

Despite a tendency for *near drowning* to persist, most persons have found the ILSF consensus statement on drowning terminology to be reasonable and advantageous to adopt. I think this change in terminology has been successful because it clarifies and simplifies what had become a complicated and confusing “Babel” of terms. I do think the aquatic community still needs to continue to educate the

lay public about the two categories and explain why other terms are inadequate and ought to be avoided. (Note: Astute readers may have noted that near drowning remains one of the *IJARE* key word descriptors although we are making efforts to replace it.)

Sexuality Terminology

In several of the articles in this very issue of *IJARE*, different terms are used to identify males vs. females. The term, *sex*, is supposed to be applied when a person's biological sexual characteristics are at issue. Starting back in the 1950s and strengthened by the feminist movement in the 1970s with a better understanding of how biological sex and culture interacted, the term, *gender*, has gained popularity. As a concept, gender is most appropriately employed as a social or cultural construct, or when describing characteristics associated with femininity vs. masculinity. I recommended to one recent author that they ought to use sex instead of gender. The author referred me to the definition used in the 6th edition of the *Publication Manual* by the American Psychological Association (APA):

Gender is cultural and is the term to use when referring to women and men as social groups. *Sex* is biological; use it when the biological distinction is predominant. Note that the word *sex* can be confused with *sexual behavior*. *Gender* helps keep meaning unambiguous . . . (APA, 2010, p. 71)

The author felt that because the term was being used based on simple observation, *gender* was the most appropriate term. When I initially read the APA guideline, I had interpreted *sex* to be most appropriate. In this case, after considering the third and fourth sentences above, I decided to follow the author's preference because of the obvious lack of clarity over what was biological or what was culturally constructed. I also found several other sources online that explained that the use of *gender* had become so widespread that it has begun to be used almost universally in the social sciences without regard for context.

Origin, Ethnicity, and Heritage

With the issue of how to describe a group's country or region of origin, I admit to being perhaps a 'minority of one' tilting at a windmill. In this case, I am undaunted and want to argue my case for using a logical and parallel category system instead of the popular system used even by the U.S. Census Bureau. When describing someone's ethnicity, the predominant classification system has used *White* (or *Caucasian*) to describe persons of European ancestry. Other categories are *African-American*, *Asian-American*, *Hispanic* or *Latin-American*, *Native* (or aboriginal) *American*, and *other*.

What I find objectionable to this classification is that it does not use a parallel set of categorical labels and it seems to me to be extremely "Euro-centric." To be truly parallel, the classification should classify persons by their continent or region or country of origin (e.g., *European-American* instead of *White* for those whose ancestry clearly descends from European countries). The American Psychologi-

cal Association (2010, pp. 71–72) recommends two guidelines, “describe at the appropriate level of specificity” and “be sensitive to labels” which suggests calling groups of people by the name that they prefer. I strongly encourage authors to follow these reasonable APA guidelines.

Persons Involved in Research

Traditionally when humans and their attributes or behaviors were the focus of research study, the term of choice was *subject*. Many institutions still employ the term *human subjects* when referring to their institutional review board (IRB). The APA and other social science groups popularized the term *participant* as a way of affirming a philosophy that research was not something done to a person (as it might be to an animal or plant), but emphasizing that the person was participating willingly as a volunteer and had given her or his informed consent. Many authors in the journal may have noted my strong preference for using *participant*.

The most contemporary guideline espoused by APA takes a broader and more flexible approach which seems reasonable. This guideline is called Acknowledge Participation. More specifically, they state, “write about the people in your study in a way that acknowledges their participation but is also consistent with the traditions of the field in which you are working.” The term *subject* may be used although *participant* is still encouraged. What often makes most sense is to avoid either generic term in favor of a more descriptive term that identifies the group according to an age category or other variable under study. For example, it might make sense when studying students in a swim class to identify them as *children*, *students*, *swimmers*, or even *learners*. In water exercise, the term *exerciser* might work or more generally *adults* or *older adults*, depending upon the chronological age of the participants. In more therapeutic or clinical settings, certainly the terms *patient* or *client* could be appropriate. As APA emphasizes, a key to choosing an appropriate term is to use one that recognizes the worth of the individual person, rather than focusing mainly on a characteristics such as a deficit or a disability. With that regard, I personally find APA’s gentle recommendation to use active rather than passive voice to indicate participants were actively involved rather than being acted upon (e.g., “participants completed the informed consent” rather than “the informed consent was administered to the subjects”).

Immigrant Versus Migrant

Over the past year, several papers to *IJARE* examined characteristics associated with a group of persons who were non-native to the country in which the study was being conducted. I was taken by surprise when the term *migrant* was used to describe members of a group who had changed residence from one country to another. Certainly the definition of *migrant* fits that usage; however, I was surprised because in the United States the term *migrant* has a strong negative connotation associated with groups who frequently move or may not have any permanent residence. Instead, I strongly encouraged the use of a parallel and synonymous term, *immigrant*, to describe individuals or groups who purposefully had changed

country of residence. In this case, the definition of the term *migrant* might have evoked very negative cultural connotations for U.S. readers. I appreciate that the affected authors were willing to adapt to the cultural sensitivity.

Competence Versus Skill Versus Ability

In the English language, there has been an enduring tendency to describe a person's capability in the water environment as that person's *swimming ability*. It is a frequently and easily recognized term. Here's the hitch: In the specialized learning and motor learning literature, the terms, *ability* and *skill*, have very different connotations. By definition, *ability* is any attribute or behavior which is very consistent and generally resistant to change, while a *skill* refers to a capacity that can be modified or learned, usually as a product of practice or other experience. If one stops to consider, it should be fairly apparent that swimming is definitely a *skill*, not *ability*.

To confound the issue more, in 1995, Larry Bruya and I coined the term, *water competence*, as part of the title of our *Aquatic Readiness* text. At the time, as I have explained elsewhere, we intended to provide a more gender neutral alternative for *watermanship*, a concept meant to describe one's general mastery of many different and varied aquatic skills. Over time, however, I have come to realize that *water competence* transcends both *ability* and *skill*. The trouble with those terms is that they are viewed as a possession of the individual performer, whether resistant to change or not. I now appreciate that a person's physical proficiency or how they actually coordinate and control movement is really an outcome of the interaction among their personal qualities (e.g., physical size, fitness levels), the demands of the task (e.g., goal) they are undertaking, and the contextual characteristics (e.g., physical environment) in which they are immersed.

A favorite and somewhat disingenuous example I have used as an explanation is to ask students in my class who of them can swim. In a typical college class, most hands go up. I follow the first question with a request of a random student to "show me how they can swim." The poor student is immediately flustered and blurts out, "Well, not here. I have to go to the pool." If I persist when it is clear they don't see the paradox, I follow with, "Now, wait a minute. You just said you possess the capability (i.e., either ability or skill) to swim. Now you are telling me that you can't swim unless you are somewhere special. So, which is it? Do you possess the ability to swim or not?" Unfortunately, the point is often missed by students or they think I am trying to confuse them with verbal tricks. My intent is to communicate that language does make a big difference and that as critical thinkers nuances can be very important. My other point is that one's *swimming ability*, or *swimming skill level*, or even *water competence* is not some static possession they carry around with them like a hat or eye glasses, but that it is an emergent property that varies depending readily and easily as person qualities, task demands, and environment context differ and interact. It is widely recognized that the highly competent pool swimmer is not necessarily equally competence in open water or in heavy surf or in cold water. Nor is one's competency static over time. Developmentally, competency normally increases during childhood into adulthood whereupon it gradually decreases as one's personal and physiological capacities decline.

Pejorative Terms

I have one final example of language usage that I have only just begun to fully comprehend, thanks to a chance email comment by a colleague (Linda Quan, personal communication). I have often criticized something I call the “error correction” model for a variety of reasons. In addition to philosophical issues, I believe this prevalent way of thinking about the psychomotor domain has fostered a strong tendency in physical education, exercise, and especially aquatics to commonly label one’s psychomotor performance using adjectives such as *good vs. bad* or *correct vs. incorrect* or *right vs. wrong*. Don’t we read about a “good swimmer?” Similarly don’t we often hear someone described as swimming *incorrectly*?

I have realized that we intend these pejorative adjectives to convey an apparent connotation as shorthand without needing to explain in detail what is good or incorrect. We have adopted adjectives in lieu of the rigor needed for greater precision. Of course it is easier to simply add the pejorative adjective (i.e., good, bad) than to stop to consider what we intend to precisely convey about a performance.

I suggest that biomechanics may provide an alternative approach with much more explanatory power by using the terms *efficiency* and *effectiveness*. When a particular pattern of movement in the water is *efficient*, it conveys the precise meaning that energy is being expended in an optimal fashion within the context and task. When a particular stroke is *effective* (again for a particular task and within a certain environment), it means that it has achieved a specific goal or task demand. Sometimes one or the other of these concepts is appropriate and sometimes they are combined. In other words, when we normally might describe a stroke as *not correct*, wouldn’t it be preferable to describe it as expending energy sub-optimally or note that it is not particularly effective in achieving a desired goal (e.g., number of strokes or time)?

What is in a name? It much more complicated than we can possibly appreciate at first glance. I present these examples as some ways we ought to be challenging ourselves to use more meaningful language with greater precision and specificity. To do less is unworthy of our goal of disseminating our scholarly stories.

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