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"Nicknames: a qualitative exploration into the effect of nick-names on personal histories."

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Abstract

This piece of qualitative research explores the impact of nicknames upon the researchers. The research shows that nicknames function positively and negatively, and can either disturb contact on the Gestalt Cycle or benefit contact. This research highlights its limitations, and suggests ways of building upon its findings.

Introduction

We are four trainee psychotherapists, and this is a piece of collaborative research and part of the requirements for the professional Diploma in Gestalt Psychotherapy leading to registration by the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy. The research results from studying the module on human development at the Scarborough Psychotherapy Institute, as part of post-graduate training in Gestalt Psychotherapy.

Our topic is Nicknames, and we felt that this impacted upon our own personal histories.

Name-calling, unkind nicknames and other forms of verbal harassment represent some of the most prevalent forms of bullying. As researchers, we found out immediately that there is very little literature on the subject, particularly within the field of psychotherapy. We found that name- calling, and nicknames in particular, are ambiguous social events that can serve positive as well negative goals, and their adverse consequences can be difficult to identify.

When conducting the research, we engaged in an interview on our own recollections of name-calling and nicknames in our childhood and while at school. We described coping with them primarily by means of verbal retaliation or ignoring the names. Although the experience was regarded less negatively over time, this was not the case for those who reported finding the names most hurtful.

There was a stronger association of name-calling with physical bullying, and we rated our current feelings about the past experience as more negative.

A second feature of these forms of verbal behaviour that can make them difficult to identify as bullying is the central role that humour plays, and humour is one of the defining characteristics of teasing. Wit enhances the effectiveness of the tease and can make it more difficult to respond appropriately, but the person who has received the nickname cannot always be expected to see the funny side; ordinary discourse distinguishes between 'laughing with' and 'laughing at' someone.

This is an under-researched area, but is of profound importance to the area of Psychotherapy. Nicknames have an importance on sense of self. Nicknames are inextricably linked to the concept and experience of shame.

Name-calling and nicknames are prevalent and hurtful features. They are hurtful because they threaten the person's (child, adolescent and adult) identity.

Names are central to a person's identity and even playful mockery or teasing about one's name can hurt.

We have recalled being at the receiving end of both name-calling and nicknames, and this was felt to be an intensely unpleasant experience, which continued to be regarded in a negative light long afterwards.

In all, this study aims to assess the incidence of nicknames, name-calling and other forms of verbal harassment within the participants, and to examine the kinds of names that are reported and the impact of this behaviour upon them.

Literature Review

Sadly, despite searching all National and International social science research journals that were available on line through the University of York, we found very little. We hope that this research builds systematically upon this gap in the literature.

Crozier *et al* (1991) reported in their research that teasing about appearance was the most frequent form (27% of reported teases), closely followed by

teasing about psychological characteristics and personal habits (26% of teases). Similar trends are found in a study where female undergraduate students recalled being teased during childhood and adolescence, 72% of respondents reported being teased about their appearance, facial attributes and weight were the most frequent targets of teasing, and peers in general the most common perpetrators. This study of nicknames found that physical appearance and psychological characteristics were common categories of nicknames.

However, nicknames with sexual connotations are also represented in children's lists of disliked names and unkind nicknames, and when they report on nasty comments and rumour spreading, these become the single largest category. In calling these names, children have the intent to hurt other children, and they do so by identifying the victim with a group.

Crozier *et al* (2002) explained that a sample of 220 adults responded to a questionnaire on their recollections of name-calling and nicknames while at school. Hurtful names were reported by 141 participants, who described coping with them primarily by means of verbal retaliation or ignoring the names. The participants rarely told teachers and most stated that their school was unhelpful.

The study has not addressed the issue of whether a distinction between name-calling and nicknames is of psychological significance.

In ordinary language nicknames are identified with the individual, functioning as an addition to or a substitute for their actual name. Name-calling is more ephemeral, perhaps uttered in the heat of the moment, and the epithet can be applied to many people. Racist name-calling may be widely applied to members of ethnic groups, but their persistence might make them psychologically equivalent to a hurtful nickname. The researchers mentioned that this issue deserves further examination, possibly using questionnaires that distinguish between name-calling and nicknames.

Ang *et al* (2001) investigated the relationship between psychopathology and shame. In the last twenty-five years there has been considerable research literature about the nature of shame. The terms shame and guilt are often used interchangeably, but growing theoretical and empirical literature point towards important differences in the phenomenology of shame and guilt. The theoretical and empirical literature suggests that while guilt is an unpleasant and an uncomfortable experience, the experience with shame is far more painful and devastating.

Shame focuses on the entire self, with guilt comes the tension, regret or remorse which prompts the person towards reparative action such as apologizing, undoing or repairing the harm that was done. With shame the person feels that no such corrective action is possible, and, consequently, feels like hiding from others, and wants to disappear.

Overall, the available literature is limited in terms of quantity; there is very little, and even less in relation to the study of psychotherapy. However, the literature is of good quality, and could well inform future research.

Methodology

As a group of four psychotherapy trainees, we initially discussed, on an informal basis, the pros and cons of using qualitative or quantitative methods for conducting our research into nicknames. Qualitative methods provided us with a flexible approach and can incorporate sensitivity into the data collection. The data extracted can provide insights into the therapeutic process and to every day life. Qualitative methods are very much aligned with the therapeutic process of sensitive listening, combined with checking out and eliciting the stories people have to tell. As described by McLeod (2001), "The primary aim of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of how the world is constructed." (McLeod, 2001, p. 2) Overall, the construction is that of a complex, multi-layered, social and relational world. The world can be viewed in many different ways and qualitative inquiry seeks to put some structure around the interpretation of these views.

Qualitative inquiry has 3 main areas of study: to elicit knowledge of the other; knowledge of a phenomenon; reflexive knowledge. Knowledge of the phenomena was of particular interest to us as the subject matter of nicknames was seen as a phenomenon that we, as individuals, had experienced.

Quantitative research does rely on the existence of facts to allow analysis to be done. A few variables are examined in a large number of cases to elicit a statistical pattern. It was not clear whether we would have any hard facts that we could analyse. The cause and effect of nicknames, we felt, would not lend itself to quantitative research. The emphasis for us was more on the meaning of nicknames for the individual rather than statistically proving something on the nature or incidence of nicknames. Given that quantitative research does rely on large sample size we were unsure as to whether we would be able to find a significant sample size given the logistical constraints of the research group. Thus we selected qualitative inquiry as our base methodology.

Cresswell (1998) describes 5 traditions of qualitative research, biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. We discounted the following methodologies very quickly:

1) Ethnography. Extensive field research required i.e. 6 months to 1 year. We had around 3-4 months maximum.

2) Case study. Insufficient client base, although we could become our own clients.

3) Biography. Inclusion of all members of the group in providing data.

A phenomenological approach seeks to understand the essence of a phenomena experienced by the data subjects. A phenomenological approach was selected over grounded theory, as we felt we had enough material within the group of 4 researchers. Grounded theory would require a much larger number of data subjects. A phenomenological approach would allow us to draw on the experiences of all members of the group without the need to go beyond the group.

The equal gender mix and ethnic diversity within the group, we felt, would provide rich sources of experience. We discussed oppression openly beforehand, and felt that there were no structural or internal oppressive factors which we needed to specifically focus upon in order to give an open account of experience.

As a group we were geographically very distant from each other, and by using additional data subjects outside of the group we felt would be overly complex. This was our first attempt at working collaboratively and simplicity, we felt, was important.

We discussed the method of data collection and concluded that a focus group with a broad topic would encourage the retelling of life experiences in relation to nicknames. A focus group is an organised discussion with a specific discussion point in mind. The aim is to bring together the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of disparate individuals and distil common themes from analysis of the transcriptions. We considered the use of an open ended questionnaire as the method of data collection. When we discussed this further we concluded that we would only essentially have one question to ask. The question was, "What was the impact of nicknames on you throughout your life?" Hence a focus group felt more appropriate.

Our initial discussions highlighted that, although we had experienced nicknames, we did so at different times in our life. We realised that, to capture as much data as possible, we would need to focus upon a broad question, thus allowing for both childhood and adulthood experiences to be included. This would enable our data to be collected organically, without firm presuppositions, and so our data would inform our findings rather than vice versa.

We kept the definition of nicknames to be any name given to you by others. We agreed that we would record any focus group discussion and have the recording transcribed. All group members agreed to keep the subject matter confidential within the group and that we would abide by the S.C.P.T.I. "Code of Ethics". The subject of publication was briefly discussed however no agreement reached.

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject of nicknames we acknowledged that we would need a high level of tact and understanding when discussing nicknames and that the subject would touch on painful memories. Post discussion support was offered should the work become too distressing.

We provisionally agreed to conduct one focus group with the possibility of others should the level of content be insufficient. Our first focus group was conducted at St Catherine's Hospice in Scarborough on 11th December 2005. A digital voice recorder was used and the discussion lasted for approx 40 minutes. Once completed, the electronic copy of the recording was dispatched by email to the group member who would arrange the transcription. A transcriber was approached, and their terms of operation were passed to the group for approval before the transcription was submitted. The transcriber agreed that the transcription would be held until instruction was received to delete it, and that the subject matter was not to be discussed.

Upon the receipt of the verbatim transcription, the electronic copies were disseminated to the group. The electronic documents were password protected. Each member of the group was invited to read the transcriptions and mark out passages and words that particularly salient to them. No attempt was to be made to deduce why certain paragraphs were of importance as this would lead to premature analysis of the data and may prejudice the process. The highlighted transcriptions were to be returned to the group for data analysis.

No member checked the transcription for accuracy, although when re-reading the document, it was apparent that there were some typographical errors. Notwithstanding, the document was, overall, an accurate representation of our discussion.

Data Analysis

Please note cross references to data in the transcripts are retained, though not included as an appendices to the article.

The analysis of this data has been done by reading the transcripts several times. This was in order to understand the text and elucidate the meaning for each participant. Each reading revealed more complexity. However, several themes emerged, which we have clustered together under different headings. It was evident that the headings were quite arbitrary, and that other themes could be found within the text – giving another subjective meaning to the work. This analysis has a kaleidoscopic nature with the nuances of meaning subtly changing according to the perspective, at any one time, of the participants, the author, and the reader.

The main theme which emerged was around identity, and under the main theme there were several sub sets of experience.

These were:

- Confusion
- Shame
- Sense of self
- Gender identity
- Who am I?
- Alienation
- Age
- Infantilisation
- Rights of passage
- Social inclusion

Confusion

There were examples where identity was associated with some confusion. The confusion was of different types. There is an uncertainty about individual identity which has been lost in group identity. For one group member, 'Kiddo' was used as a generic term of identification for family members. To be called Kiddo was to be rendered almost anonymous, but there was a group identity which was shared amongst all the family members who were so named, "Mum used to always call us Kiddo but she would call all of us Kiddo." (p. 8, lines 2-3). While there was a clear element of inclusion, individuality was subsumed into the group identity. The same name was given by the mother to all the children and the father.

There was confusion when a name was given and its meaning and intent were unclear, "When I was very young I had two names – I never understood why - I was called Noodles Crumble" (p. 8 lines 6-7). At the time this was perceived as "sweet and endearing", but with hindsight it was regarded as "belittling and taking the piss".

Names were also given by people outside the family, when the mother, herself in a post natal state of shock and disappointment (as she had hoped to have a girl not another boy) handed the choice of her baby's name to the nurses around her. The poignant story surrounding the event is one of loss and confusion, "You can't call him Toby" (p. 6 line 9) [because] "...he's definitely an Andrew" (p. 6 line 15).

Shame

Shame frequently seems to be bound up with names and a sense of self. This can be for many reasons, "I feel deep shame even saying that name; I feel it has connotations of 'not good enough'" (p. 4 lines 23-24). The paralyzing effect of shame undermines self confidence and a self belief, "I was very offended but I couldn't say anything. I kept quiet … because it was my job and I was new here." (p. 3 lines 3-4)

Sense of self

Participants experienced a loss of sense of self in various ways. One of which is by being given so many names that individuality is lost, "I have hundreds of nicknames. It's really difficult to get a sense of yourself when you have so many different names." (p. 4 lines 12-13)

Another example in which names challenge a sense of self is when one sibling is treated differently from the rest, "I think it is not being a person ... all my brothers are called by their real names". (p. 13 lines 5-6) A further example is when a name is commonly used and consequently becomes symbolic of sameness, "It's the most dull name, the most typical British name I think you can get and it just says absolutely nothing about me." (p. 6 lines 16-17) "I feel robbed ... I wish I had an exciting name." (p.6 lines 22-23) "I don't know if I've tried to become a bit brighter than my name really." (p. 7 lines 6-7)

Gender Identity

One of the participants in this study was given a clear message about being born the wrong sex. The implications of this were apparent indifference to the boy child he was, "She didn't get a girl, she got another boy and she was gutted. She said [to the nurses] call him whatever you want." (p. 6 lines 9-10)

Another example is of names for both genders, "My middle name was always a problem because it was Lyndsey. That was always very embarrassing because all I saw was a girl's name." (p. 7 line 27 until p. 8 lines 1-2)

Who am I?

Names can also be used as a weapon in marital disharmony, as shown in one example which was perpetuated throughout childhood. A participant felt that she was either the wrong person or the right person with the wrong name.

"You weren't supposed to be Sheilagh Margaret, you were going to be Francesca (and I think Caroline was in there somewhere) and this battle raged between my father and mother all through my life." (p. 4 lines 20-23) "I have always had this sense that I am not named what I am supposed to be named." (p. 5 lines 1-2) "I suppose quite confusing for a child. I think I learned to be everything that anyone wanted me to be … an undemanding child." (p. 5 lines 16-17)

There are examples of participants being nick-named by their families, and becoming identified as the nick-name "What's the name of your little girl? [a question addressed to a participant's mother] And she forgot, she did not know, only by my nickname." (p. 1 lines 6-7)

Rights of Passage

Names pervade every stage of life and have powerful effects on our lives. They can be disempowering and infantalising or a symbolic leaving-behind something unwanted.

Infantalising

Some participants commented upon the infantilising effect of the perpetuation of names they were given when very young. "When I was a kid I couldn't say Andrew. For years I became Nanoo. When you are growing up and you want to become an older person you are still held back by this, "Oh what's your name? Nanoo. It still grates on me." (p. 4 lines 4-7)

Adolescence

Nicknames, and the power thereof alter dramatically when people approached adolescence, "I think nicknames stopped becoming oppressive when I was in the sixth form because I remember quite fondly referring to each other by our Christian names." (p. 8 lines 27-29) "The nicknames weren't there." (p. 9 line 1)

Adulthood

Similarly, when people enter adulthood, the effect of nicknames alters again, "It was the most amazing experience for people to suddenly call me a name I liked. It was wonderful." (p. 6 lines 5-6)

Alienation

Names can be cruelly abusive. One participant experienced racist abuse through the use of nicknames, "Somebody, I think, well, didn't like me, who wasn't used to a foreigner, and she called me Ku Klux Klan." (p. 2 22-23) The perpetrator seems to have been confused about the nature of the Ku Klux Klan which was little comfort to the victim.

Being victimised because of physical characteristics is another area of alienation and abuse, "I was called Big Nose at school which was very oppressive and hurtful it was a friend who used to call me that." (p. 7 lines 15-17)

Social Inclusion

Some participants experienced times when their names denoted social inclusion, "I was 'Spanners' because I was a technician and an alter ego and we had taken on various characters within Red Dwarf and it felt quite inclusive … and excluded others." (p. 9 lines 7-9)

"Since I have started to work here … people have been calling me Bea." (p. 2 line 15) "Yes, Bea is a friendly name and I don't mind people calling me Bea." (p. 2 line 19)

Giving and receiving special names can create intimacy and inclusivity, "I call my partner Blue and he calls me Red when we are being all affectionate and nice." (p. 10 lines 11-12)

Emotional impact

The impact of the names given was varied. There is a duality about the effects of name calling/giving and these can be understood in terms of themed polarities, for example isolation and belonging, inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and acceptance, identity and anonymity, power and powerlessness. One of the themes was confusion. This confusion was about identity – if I am not, then who am I? Am I the wrong person or is the name the wrong name for me? There was confusion about the intent behind the name given -is it to include or exclude? Names were given to discriminate against or to alienate. Names, at times, increased the sense of isolation and confusion, loss of identity, loss of sense of self, alienation, discrimination, and anonymity.

It was found that names can also have a positive impact upon the emotional self. They can be used to denote affection, inclusion, social identity, familiarity, and a sense of belonging in a special intimate way.

Discussion

Our research suggests that names have a powerful effect on us. We identify with our names. A name is who we are and who others expect us to be. Shakespeare wrote, "What's in a name – a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Although this is undoubtedly true, we are inextricably bound up with our names. Our earliest memories are of what we were named why we were called what we were, and how the naming came about has a profound effect on how we experience ourselves in our familial setting and later on in the wider world.

These participants reported a profundity in feeling both in the here and now during the discussions about nicknames, and a more enduring reconciliation with the past after the 'airing' of what had heretofore been hidden. The disclosures required simultaneously a certain heroism to brave the shame which was linked to the names, and a certain trust in the group in order to avoid further shame resulting from the disclosures. We have learnt that discussing nicknames requires tact, support, and effective attunement at the contact boundary in order to make the discussions as safe as possible.

It is apparent that nicknames can be used as a weapon of destruction to both destroy a person's sense of self, and also to alienate them from a group. Truly, people can be incredibly nasty towards one another, and this tendency does not end at school.

Nick-names can also be used as a shepherd's crook to bring people closer, improve the group process, or develop a sense of cohesion amongst members. Peculiarly, nick-names don't exist in isolation from other people; they exist on the contact boundary, and we rarely acquire nick-names alone to be used with ourselves, unless of course the name is used for an assumed or alter other. Nick-names either block contact or facilitate it.

Nick-names permeate all aspects of our lives. They begin before or immediately after birth, take hold in childhood, and they can endure after death. Profound feelings emerge when we begin to discuss them, and these can result from even the subtlety of a spelling change or modified pronunciation. The distinction between given and assumed and adopted names can be overwhelming.

Under-pinning all use of nick-names is the concept of power. Nick-names are used to denigrate the 'weaker' of two parties, perhaps when the perceived stronger party feels threatened. This serves, then, as a need to ameliorate a sense of inadequacy in one party, and invade another person's sense of self. Nick-names are also used to include a weaker party in to the more powerful one, as when say a group welcomes a new member in to their membership.

In Gestalt terms, it is clear that nick-names can be a form of projective identification, and therefore be a disturbance on the contact boundary at the action stage of the Gestalt Cycle. One of our team refers to her racial tormentor calling her, 'Klu Klux Klan'. This suggests that the racist attributes her own racism to them, out of awareness. Clearly, a person of colour would hopefully not be a member of the 'Klu Klux Klan', and somehow the racist's shame and hatred has become mixed up. Certainly, this researcher recalled a sense of confusion with this name, and an inability to comprehend the racist's condemnation. This was perhaps a means of protecting herself from the impact of the racist's hatred, and therefore vicariously denying her tormentor the wished for outcome (emotional destruction).

Our data also shows that names can function as a way of deflection. One member recalled his post-natally depressed mother rejected him symbolically through refusing to name him. This was a way of either denying herself the awareness of her feeling of love, or perhaps not even feeling love at this point for her new born child. The mother had the sensation and the bond, but deflected these feelings as she consciously was upset about her child's gender, or the gender that she thought her child should have been. It also suggests a poignant sense of desperation on the mother's behalf, as she pines for what she thought she wanted or should have had; a little girl. Perhaps this suggests some sense of introjection (Perls *et al*, p .189. 1972), in that someone somewhere has told her that she would or should have a little girl in order to be complete, and thus complete the contact cycle. The act of giving someone a nickname, then, can itself be a deflection on the part of the giver

Children are often caught up in adults' fights about names, and another member's experience can be seen as a way of her father rejecting her mother's wishes in order to assert his own. This researcher later adopts a chosen name for herself, perhaps as a form of rebellion against her father. This could be interpreted as Egotism (Latner, p. 92, 1986), whereby she steps outside of her original self, that forced upon her by her father, and adopts a new self. This is a way for her to survive her environment. The difficulty is that this mechanism can disturb good contact with the

environment, and get in the way of having one's needs met. It would be interesting to perhaps pursue this further in subsequent research, in the sense of ascertaining whether or not this was the case.

One researcher, at 6 weeks of age, had new names given to him when he was adopted. In short, his previous identity was denied him by both his adoptive parents and the State. In some sense he began again, and so introjected his new identity over the beginnings of the first. Introjection is the way in which we, out of awareness, take in ideas, feelings and rules from significant others in our environment. For this researcher was not aware of his previous identity and hence the only identity he has conscious of is that which he associates with his given name. This inevitably helped him survive his environment in the early stages of his life, but would perhaps now benefit from re-investigating the relevance of what may have been introjected. This is important to consider because our studies into human development have shown that identity begins to form even before birth. It should also be added here that we have given simplistic answers to complex issues, and our answers may only account for some of the person.

Nicknames did not only disturb contact on the Gestalt cycle (Clarkson, p. 33. 2004). In many ways, nicknames helped develop positive contact between people. One researcher spoke of becoming better assimilated with adolescent groupings through the use of nicknames. Nicknames, here, mobilised him in to making contact with his peers, and reduced the danger inherent within these kind of sub-groups.

One researcher commented upon using intimate names between him and his partner. Nicknames, here, function as a way of enhancing contact, and as an indicator of when things are good for the researcher and his partner. Nicknames therefore enhance contact at the satisfaction stage of the Gestalt cycle.

Another researcher, although partially embroiled within a difficult relationship at work, recognises that another name – a pseudonym, or an abbreviation of her original full name – is an indicator of acceptance. The pseudonym is a way of her forging quality contact with people, and means of completing the Gestalt cycle.

Conclusion

The limitations in word count necessitated only a cursory analysis of the meaning of nicknames in our lives. We all felt (nay feel) that this kind of study can function as a preamble to a more

thorough piece of work, perhaps in the form of a PhD?

As researchers, we feel that we have only discovered the tip of the iceberg; an enormous piece of the iceberg remains hidden beneath the ocean. Our findings, we feel, warrant a more thorough analysis. This is so that our findings can be used more fully within Gestalt Psychotherapy.

Nicknames are often perceived as negative concepts. We largely remember nicknames from our childhood as hurtful, exclusionary things, and they created a sense of ostracism. Our findings show that this is not necessarily the case. Nicknames can be used positively, and this is a useful concept to remember within the therapeutic encounter.

Above all, we have found this research to be stimulating and exhausting. We all struggled to complete the exercise, and so are thankful for reaching the end of this particular journey. We hope that this work is as enthralling for you as it was (is) for us.

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