

What's in a name?

Reflections on professional title

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It will be no surprise to members that the academic world has spent much time and energy theorising and analysing why professions assign such importance to, and invest such emotion in, their titles.

Whilst many of us may hold different views on the use of particular titles, there is no doubt their importance ensures they remain a matter of compelling interest. We may be concerned to ensure protected titles such as 'podiatrist' remain restricted to those who register with the Health and Care Professions Council, as the only sure safeguard for the public. Equally, some may favour relinquishing the title 'chiropractor', on the grounds that it has been superseded by 'podiatrist' and that it no longer adequately conveys the extended scope of our practices, while others may actively seek to retain it, knowing that many patients still identify with the title and recognise it.

For some years the Society has used both titles, adopting an all-inclusive designation following the decision taken at the AGM of 1992¹, and it may well continue to link both until a compromise can be agreed in future, highlighting the depth of feeling the issue evokes. Some titles, of course, are particularly hotly contested, often by competing professions seeking exclusive rights to their use, such as 'doctor', 'consultant' or, in the case of our profession, 'podiatric surgeon'.² For example, one author in the medical profession has recently coined the rather pejorative term 'noctors' to describe 'non-doctors' who use the 'medical' title 'doctor'.³ As an academic who has attained a legitimate right to this title, I may be inclined to dispute its description as a purely 'medical' title, but I do, nevertheless, understand that context is all important. So-called 'courtesy titles' ensure some 'noctors' are able to be called doctors in healthcare settings, such as dentists, a use apparently endorsed by the British Dental Association.³

Our colleagues in the United States favour 'podiatric physician' as a descriptor, clearly seek greater parity with the medical profession.^{4,5} In Cyprus, colleagues have struggled to retain the title 'podiatrist', as, in Greek, it indicates a 'foot physician', which appears to be largely unacceptable

to the medical profession there. It is well known that our own regulatory system allows for the protection of our title, but not scope of practice. This has advantages and disadvantages, but it is illuminating that legal protection of titles is considered to be worthy of state-sanctioned exclusivity, when practice is not.

So, why are titles so important to us? It seems there is more to it than simply signposting a role or position. Pierre Bourdieu, one of France's most well-known social theorists and philosophers, recognised the extent to which titles are imbued with a powerful symbolic importance, which can be used to confer status and rank – what he referred to as 'symbolic capital'.⁶ Indeed, he spoke a lot about 'capital' – not in the same sense that Karl Marx spoke of capital, but not entirely removed from it either. For Bourdieu, the social world was built, or 'constructed', around the 'social spaces' (the interstices between the 'fields') within which one operates – such as a given professional 'field of power', perhaps, like healthcare – and one's 'habitus', the way in which we acquire the things that are likely to give us an advantage in the field.

In some cases this may mean having attended a public school, speaking with a cut-glass accent, playing 'rugger' and reading *The Telegraph* (for example, see Keith Macdonald's fascinating insights into the world of the British military, for a look at the kind of 'habitus' attributes required to reach the rank of General⁷). For others, it may involve a university education, and all the associated 'ways' of behaving that help you to fit in to university life, rather than feel like a fish out of water. These are passed on from generation to generation – they are 'reproduced' in the social world – thus retaining the status quo.⁸ One of the most potent of resources are those things that provide 'symbolic capital', 'commonly called prestige, reputation, renown, etc'.⁹ Prestigious titles are highly prized forms of symbolic capital, whilst other titles may be subject to 'symbolic devaluation'.⁶

What's in a name? Quite a lot, it would appear. For Bourdieu, professional titles assume a currency more important than the work carried out by those who hold it: 'it is the symbolic scarcity of the title in the

space of the names of professions that tends to govern the rewards of the occupation (and not the relationship between the supply of and demand for a particular form of labour)'.⁶ Intriguingly, it is 'not the relative value of the work that determines the value of the name, but the institutionalised value of the title that can be used as a means of defending or maintaining the value of the work'.⁶ In short, titles, like medals, confer status.

In Weber's work on status and titles, one of the essential ingredients is that 'an individual or social group cannot enjoy it unless their prestige claims are recognised by others willing to give them deference'.¹⁰ So, when a title is contested by a more powerful social group, such as medical doctors opposing the use of the title 'doctor' by non-medically qualified people, its symbolic value is at stake. Indeed, the whole issue of symbolic boundaries 'is a contested process'.¹¹ Bourdieu argues that social life 'consists of struggles over legitimate forms of classification', and that these forms of symbolic capital are, curiously, 'bereft of intrinsic social value' in themselves. In other words, a title can be hugely important to our claims for status, but is not in itself socially useful. It is, after all, just a name.

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