

Psychology and Family Law

Do Some Psychology Schools of Thought Really Believe That Words Don't Have Meaning?



By Mark Baer, Esq.

I was recently involved in a discussion, in the Marriage Counseling & Therapy Network group on LinkedIn, regarding assumptions. Stacey Neil, LMFT, started the discussion by sharing

her article, *And Yet Another Reason We Shouldn't Assume*. In it she states, "Making assumptions is risky, full of ego, and typically inaccurate by its very nature, and yet most of us do it all of the time." The ensuing discussion centered around a disagreement as to whether or not words have meaning because "people who are listening react to what they think the speaker meant [assumed]." Some asserted that "words have no meanings, only people have meanings." Others--myself included — believed that the words used "are important and do have meaning."

In support of the belief that "words have no meaning," Myron Downing, Ph.D., referenced a book by S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa titled, *Language in Thought and Action*. He said, "I found this book a major source of help and inspiration in doing therapy. Samuel Hayakawa was the head of the General Semantics department at the University of San Francisco. He later became a State Senator in California. He was born in Japan. He came to America before the war and because of his two languages he was able to see that words are nothing but sounds that we assign some meaning to. "My words [sounds] only mean what I say they mean. People are always making up new sounds or assigning new meaning to old sounds. The more abstract the word the more different meanings we can put to it. And, the more difficult it is to know what you meant by the word. Words do not have objective meaning. What the dictionary gives us are common usages that are associated with specific sounds (that is what most people call a definition). As common usage changes, so do the definitions in the dictionary change to reflect what it means at present. The problem is the meaning is not always the same for the listener and the talker."

Those who believe that words do have meaning made a distinction between "no meaning" and "ambiguity in communication, or incomplete communication, or miscommunication for other reasons." They said that "words are fraught with meaning," even though they may

mean different things to the "speaker" and the "listener."

The discussion then moved into "cures for assumptions," such as "reframing" or "paraphrasing what you think you heard." After all, as one person noted, assumptions are the result of "our lack of willing to ask questions and to act or respond with a lack of information."

When all was said and done, one of the participants said, "It is just that semantics, differing definitions, and lack of continuity in the American language and even in our profession has created divisions and barriers in treatment."

I was perplexed by the whole discussion because it has long been recognized that the meaning of words influences human behavior. In fact, the Bible says, "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

In 1992, I was representing The Comedy Store in Hollywood in a lawsuit filed against it by a Caucasian amateur "comedian" who was injured during a riot that occurred while he was performing his "comedy" routine. For whatever reason, the audience was approximately 80 percent black on amateur night at club at that time. His "comedy" routine consisted of insults pertaining to the scent of their hair products, work ethic and other such things. After being heckled, he said "I hate doing nigger night," which provoked a riot. The "comedian" was injured and subsequently sued The Comedy Store (unsuccessfully) because the court agreed with us that "nigger" is a fighting word.

Within the context of family law, the following terms have been found to negatively influence people's behavior: divorce, child custody, visitation, access, sole, and primary. In an effort to change the "win/lose" dynamic, and hopefully put an end to the parental fighting caused by emotionally charged terms, many jurisdictions have eliminated these terms entirely. They have been replaced with more neutral and more conciliatory terms. Unless one parent is completely absent from a child's life, both parents always receive some percentage of timeshare, whereas unless custody is joint, only one parent receives custody and the other visitation. No parent wants to "visit" with their child, and being designated as the "visiting" parent is shaming. Words are powerful... Think about it, and I believe you'll agree.

Mark Baer, Esq. can be reached at mark@markbaeresq.com.