

Clients



“Clients” of the psychiatrist

by Theodore Dalrymple

A psychologist at a dinner party which I attended recently spoke about his “client in the community”. Two lies in four words: I suppose this was concision of a kind!

His “client” was a madman known to wield knives in a state of psychosis, a potential murderer who was under compulsory supervision and was plied with medication whether he wanted it or not (mostly not).

He was a client in the same way that I am a “customer” of His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs – and which, indeed, sometimes addresses me in circulars as such, rather as does a travel agency that hasn’t noticed yet that I last availed myself of its services about 15 years ago.

I suppose that if ever capital punishment were brought back, the condemned man would be described as a client of the hangperson – after having been, of course, a client of the

judge who passed sentence on him.

As to the community of which the knife-wielding psychotic was so valued a member, it was of the kind whose other members tended to lock their doors and stay in at night for fear of meeting such as he, perhaps on his way to meet a person of whom he really was a client, namely a drug dealer selling him one of those substances that tended to inflame his knife-wielding propensities.

The solution to this problem, of course, is value-neutral language, for it is stigma that makes the world go haywire. Change the words and you change the thing, either for the better or the worse.

Calling the client a patient would have been to imply that there was something wrong with him, and that would have had the effect of causing something wrong with him, which would have meant that he would have to become a client twice over, and so on ad infinitum. We really must be careful what we say.

First published in [*The Critic*](#).