

Shaping Understanding: The Role of Professional Language in Massage Therapy

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<https://doi.org/10.3822/ijtmb.v19i1.1459>

Language shapes how therapeutic massage and bodywork are perceived by clients, colleagues, policymakers, and the public. Professional credibility depends not only on what practitioners do but also on how they describe their work. The diversity of terms used across research, education, and practice reflects the field's richness but can also blur its public image, limit research coherence, and hinder integration within health systems. This editorial examines the role of language in defining professional credibility and reviews key initiatives that have sought to establish shared terminology and taxonomies. By advancing collaboration across research, education, and practice, massage therapists can continue to refine their professional language. Clear, credible, and inclusive communication strengthens public trust and reinforces massage therapy's contribution to health and well-being across the continuum of care.

KEYWORDS: Massage therapy; terminology; taxonomy; identity

INTRODUCTION

How we speak about our work shapes how others see it. For massage therapists, the language used to describe practice, including the words chosen to explain what we do, why we do it, and for whom, has a significant influence on public understanding and professional credibility. Our words reach far beyond the treatment room; they inform how clients, policymakers, educators, and other health professionals interpret the role of massage therapy in health care.

A practitioner who describes their work as “supporting wellness and relaxation”

may evoke comfort and accessibility, while another who frames it as “addressing soft tissue dysfunction and promoting functional recovery” positions massage therapy within the language of clinical care. Both are accurate, yet each constructs a different image of the profession's purpose and scope. Such linguistic variation is not inherently problematic; diversity of expression reflects the richness of massage therapy's history and practice. However, inconsistent communication can blur public understanding and limit integration.

Language has the power to shape identity, credibility, and belonging. In health care, the words used to describe what we do signal both our values and our alignment with broader systems of care. For massage therapy to be recognized as both compassionate and credible, grounded in care and informed by evidence, we must consider not only the language we use among ourselves but also the language we offer to the world.

HOW LANGUAGE DEFINES PROFESSIONAL CREDIBILITY

In health care, credibility is often built through language that signals both values and alignment with the expectations of health systems. For massage therapy, the language chosen to explain assessment, treatment, and outcomes not only reflects the nature of practice but also communicates its legitimacy to others. As Altun⁽¹⁾ notes, language does more than convey information; it constructs identity, power, and social belonging. The words a profession chooses to communicate both who its members are and how they wish to be perceived within the larger health community.

Terms such as manual therapy, soft tissue intervention, or evidence-informed practice resonate with biomedical frameworks and may position the practitioner as a peer within interprofessional teams. In contrast, expressions such as energy work, holistic treatment, or mind-body balance evoke a different lineage of care, one rooted in wellness, intuition, and connection. Each carries meaning, yet each speaks differently to audiences shaped by scientific, regulatory, or public expectations.

This diversity of language reflects massage therapy's strength as well as its challenge. The field draws from multiple traditions, including medical, somatic, psychological, and cultural perspectives, each of which has enriched its approaches to healing. Yet the plurality of terms used across settings can fragment the profession's image. To the public, it may be unclear whether massage therapy is a health service, a wellness experience, or a form of complementary care. For non-massage therapy health professionals, inconsistent language can obscure both the depth of training and the growing evidence that supports practice.

When a profession speaks with many voices, it can struggle to be heard. Coherence in language does not require uniformity; it requires an awareness of how words represent the profession to others. For massage therapists, clarity and consistency in how we describe our work may be among the most powerful tools for strengthening credibility, building trust, and advancing integration within the broader health-care landscape.

FRAGMENTED LANGUAGE, FRAGMENTED PERCEPTION

The language of a profession is one of its most visible markers of cohesion. When the language of massage therapy fragments, even subtly, the effects can ripple through all aspects of professional practice. Variation in how practitioners, educators, and researchers describe their work has contributed to mixed messages, limited visibility, and uneven recognition within health systems. As others have observed, inconsistent terminology can confuse clients, weaken professional credibility, and obscure the therapeutic intent behind massage therapy practice.⁽²⁾

Although many initiatives have sought to bring greater consistency to professional language,⁽³⁻⁸⁾ fragmentation continues to influence how the profession is understood by those outside it.

In research, inconsistency extends beyond the naming of techniques to include the ways outcomes and mechanisms of action are described. Studies may examine manual therapy, soft tissue manipulation, therapeutic touch, or bodywork, yet each term can refer to similar or overlapping interventions. At the same time, researchers may attribute change to biomechanical, neurophysiological, or psychosocial processes without shared definitions for these mechanisms or without shared definitions or alignment with their research questions. Such variation makes it difficult to compare findings, synthesize evidence, or develop a coherent understanding of how massage therapy contributes to health and well-being. Without a shared vocabulary for what is done, how it works, and what it achieves, the collective body of knowledge remains fragmented and difficult to integrate into broader scientific and policy discussions.

In education, language shapes both curriculum and professional identity. Students may encounter different vocabularies depending on their jurisdiction or training model, ranging from biomedical frameworks that emphasize anatomy and assessment to holistic approaches that emphasize energy and balance. These differences, while pedagogically rich, can leave graduates uncertain about how to describe their work in interprofessional settings or when communicating with clients and employers. Variation in how educators present mechanisms of action and expected outcomes can also lead to uneven understanding of what constitutes evidence or effectiveness in massage therapy. Over time, these inconsistencies reinforce regional and philosophical divides that hinder unified advocacy and professional recognition.

For the public, the result is uncertainty. Potential clients may not understand whether massage therapy is a clinical intervention, a wellness service, or both. Health professionals may remain unclear about its indications, outcomes, or regulatory requirements. Policymakers, too, may hesitate to integrate massage therapy into public programs when its language, and by extension its identity, appears diffuse.

In this way, linguistic fragmentation does more than complicate communication; it shapes how credible, trustworthy, and essential the profession appears to those outside it. Recognizing this, the profession has made repeated efforts to define and clarify its language, each seeking, in different ways, to strengthen coherence without diminishing diversity.

ATTEMPTS TO CREATE COMMON LANGUAGE STRUCTURES IN THERAPEUTIC MASSAGE AND BODYWORK

Recognizing the impact of inconsistent language on research, education, and public understanding, massage therapy scholars and professional organizations have repeatedly sought to clarify the profession's language and frameworks for describing practice. These initiatives have emerged independently, each motivated by the need to strengthen communication, credibility, and comparability across contexts. Collectively, they reflect a shared recognition that clarity in language is essential to advancing massage therapy as a credible, evidence-informed health profession.

Some of these efforts have focused on how to classify practice itself, developing taxonomies and frameworks that organize the diversity of massage therapy into understandable categories. Others have sought to define key concepts, creating shared language to describe scope of practice, competencies, and mechanisms of action. Still others have addressed safety and research communication, emphasizing the need for consistent reporting and terminology when documenting outcomes or adverse events.

Across this body of work, the intent has remained the same: to develop common language structures that honor massage therapy's diversity while presenting its knowledge and practice with clarity. The following examples illustrate how this shared goal has taken shape through different scholarly and professional pathways.

One area of focus has been the classification of practice. Sherman, Dixon, Thompson, and Cherkin⁽³⁾ proposed a taxonomy to describe massage treatments for musculoskeletal pain, identifying three levels of organization: treatment goals, styles, and techniques. Their structure emphasized descriptive rather than proprietary terminology, offering a way to represent

practice consistently across different traditions. Similarly, Porcino and MacDougall⁽⁴⁾ developed the Integrated Taxonomy of Health Care (ITHC), a framework capable of classifying both complementary and biomedical practices within a unified structure. The ITHC introduced the idea of a "primary mode of interaction," describing the way practitioners engage with clients, and positioned massage therapy as a system of health care that integrates multiple modalities. Both models illustrate efforts to organize practice diversity through clear, hierarchical language that supports communication among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

Another thread of work has aimed to establish a shared conceptual foundation for what massage therapy is. Kennedy, Cambron, Sharpe, Travillian, and Saunders⁽⁶⁾ convened a workshop at an international symposium to clarify the definitions of massage and massage therapy. Drawing on expert dialogue and qualitative analysis, they proposed that massage involves patterned and purposeful soft tissue manipulation carried out with therapeutic intent, while massage therapy encompasses both the hands-on application and broader elements such as client education and the therapeutic relationship. This conceptual framing articulated massage therapy as a multidimensional health practice, bridging technique, context, and communication.

A complementary initiative emerged in the development of the Massage Therapy Body of Knowledge (MTBOK), described by Sefton, Shea, and Hines.⁽⁵⁾ This collaborative project united several major professional organizations to define a common foundation for education, research, and practice. The MTBOK articulated scope of practice, entry-level competencies, and terminology, providing a reference point for regulators, educators, and practitioners. It recognized that shared professional language enhances credibility and consistency without diminishing philosophical diversity.

Efforts to create common language have also extended into safety and reporting frameworks. Gowan⁽⁸⁾ identified the absence of a taxonomy for patient safety incidents in massage therapy and related manual therapies. Drawing on global health models such as the World Health Organization's International Classification for Patient Safety, she argued that a

consistent taxonomy is essential for accurate reporting, quality improvement, and accountability. Her work highlighted that professional maturity involves not only defining what massage therapy is but also developing the terminology to describe and learn from adverse events.

Finally, Koren and Kalichman⁽⁷⁾ addressed terminology within clinical research, focusing on the ambiguity surrounding the term *deep tissue massage*. They distinguished between deep massage as an intention and deep tissue massage as a defined method, and they advocated for clearer operational definitions in research and education. Their analysis reinforced the view that consistent terminology is essential to ensure that research findings can be compared, replicated, and translated into practice.

Together, these initiatives illustrate the profession's ongoing pursuit of linguistic clarity across multiple dimensions: practice, concept, safety, and evidence. Collectively, they underscore the profession's recognition that language is integral to credibility and coherence. Each represents a step toward a shared lexicon that can honor the diversity of massage therapy while allowing it to be understood, studied, and valued within the broader landscape of health and healing.

ADVANCING THE CONVERSATION

The work of developing shared professional language is far from complete. Each initiative offers a foundation, yet none alone can capture the full complexity of massage therapy practice. What remains is a collective effort to connect these frameworks and extend them through ongoing research, education, and dialogue.

Future progress will depend on collaboration across all sectors of the profession. Researchers can continue refining terminology and reporting standards; educators can integrate common language into curricula; practitioners can model clear communication with clients and colleagues. Journals, such as the *International Journal of Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork*, play an important role in this process by providing a space for shared reflection, critical debate, and the dissemination of work that strengthens the profession's collective voice. Through such collaboration, the lan-

guage of massage therapy can continue to evolve with clarity, credibility, and a shared sense of purpose.

DEFINING OURSELVES TOGETHER

The language of massage therapy has always reflected its diversity, shaped by art and science, intuition and evidence, culture and care. That diversity is a foundation on which we can build, and our challenge is to speak with clarity and confidence so that our collective expertise is visible and understood by others.

Each of us contributes to the profession's shared voice. The words we use in treatment notes, research papers, and classroom discussions shape how massage therapy is understood. Clear and credible language builds trust and affirms massage therapy's role in the continuum of care. Creating a common professional lexicon is an act of leadership that begins with reflection: How do my words represent my work, and what do they communicate about my profession? By asking these questions, we can ensure that our language reflects who we are and who we are becoming.

Language is one of our most powerful tools for shaping understanding. When we choose words that are thoughtful, credible, and inclusive, we invite others to see massage therapy as both compassionate and capable, grounded in care and informed by knowledge. Through our shared commitment to language that speaks with purpose and precision, we strengthen the voice of the profession and affirm its enduring contribution to the health and well-being of the people we serve.

GENERATIVE AI ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Generative AI tools were used in the drafting of this editorial to support brainstorming and refine tone. All content was reviewed, edited, and finalized by the author to ensure accuracy and alignment with the author's personal and professional values.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST NOTIFICATION

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

FUNDING

No sources of funding were used in this study.

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