

Letter to the Editor: Identity Shift

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I read the well-researched [September 2011 Observer cover story “Identity Shift.”](#) with decidedly mixed feelings. On the one hand, I appreciate the fact that some psychology departments are changing their names (e.g., to “Department of Psychological Science”) to underscore their commitment to a scientific approach to behavior. I have no particular objection to this labeling change, especially in light of the skepticism with which many of our non-psychology academic colleagues perceive our field’s scientific basis (Lilienfeld, in press). On the other hand, I am somewhat troubled by the growing number of psychology departments that are altering their names to include “brain science,” “neuroscience,” and similar terms. As the article notes, Dartmouth’s Department of Psychology has become the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences; Indiana University’s department is similarly termed the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences; and Duke’s department now calls itself the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience. These departments are hardly alone; the University of Colorado at Boulder’s psychology department has recently become the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, and the University of Louisville’s department has become the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences.

There may well be some merit to this shift, especially if one of its principal goals is to attract talented graduate students and faculty members with interests in neuroscience. Still, I worry about this recent trend for two reasons. First, naming a psychology department a department of “psychology and neuroscience” or “psychology and brain science” inadvertently fosters a troubling mind-body dualism that our field has been battling to overcome for much of its history. In the eyes of students and the general public, the phrase “psychology and brain science” may imply that psychology as the study of “mental life,” as William James (1890) famously called it in the opening sentence of his *Principles of Psychology*, somehow lies apart from the study of the brain. This erroneous view, already far too prevalent among laypersons, is not one we should be encouraging. Second, this name shift is potentially confusing at a conceptual level too. Neuroscience is a profoundly important level of analysis for approaching psychological phenomena (see Miller, 2010, for a different perspective on the levels of analysis framework), but it is only one such level. The field of psychology encompasses all such levels, spanning from the molecular all the way up the hierarchy of explanation to the social and cultural. It would be equally misleading to name a psychology department “The Department of Psychology and Cultural Influences,” as culture is not a qualitatively separate discipline from psychology, but rather one key level of analysis for approaching and conceptualizing psychological phenomena.

I am inclined to agree with Ohio State University’s Richard Petty, cited in the article, that such name changes may not help; I actually worry that in the long run they may harm. Perhaps I am needlessly concerned. Even so, as a field we should be fostering the unity of our diverse subject matter, not creating conceptually artificial distinctions that do not exist.

– Scott O. Lilienfeld
Department of Psychology

(not Department of Psychology and Brain Science...)
Emory University