The Issue Is

Beyond the Therapy Model: Building Our Future

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One thing, among several, that I have learned over the years from my dialogues with occupational therapists across the country is that if I want to be engaged in an animated, challenging exchange, I need only question whether occupational therapy is an evolving profession and whether the profession has a commitment to ongoing change. From these encounters, as well as from a review of our literature, it has become evident that continuing development toward fuller professional status is a major interest and concern among those of us in the profession.

To follow through on a commitment for continuing development requires acknowledging, first, that becoming a profession is an evolutionary, maturation process than occurs over a very prolonged period of time. A second, very crucial factor is understanding that it is society that determines the status, the rights, privileges, and responsibilities accorded a profession. Such determinations are made, in part, on the basis of the profession's ability to respond to a broad spectrum of society's needs, interests, and concerns. Clearly, then, the more limited the scope of services offered by a profession, the more limited is movement toward a fuller professional identity (Fidler, 1978).

As a profession, our single focus on and identity as a therapy, as a remedial rehabilitation service, has, I believe, significantly hampered our development. This narrow identity has, over many years, hindered our discovery and validation of the rich and broad dimensions of occupation. The struggles to survive, to compete for a niche within the medical community and, more recently, to cope within a system in which treatment services are increasingly governed by what can be easily observed and reduced to measurement, have impaired our vision and limited our understanding of the potential inherent in our concepts. Over time, the range of occupations, of activities available to and used by occupational therapists, has been reduced to primarily upper-extremity activities of daily living (ADL), and even these are frequently narrowed to the tasks of grooming. We then tend to concretize our curriculums and teaching to meet the requirements of these job markets.

I am not advocating that we abandon our services in medicine and rehabilitation. I am, however, urging that we abandon our one-track orientation. Furthermore, I am advocating that we find the courage to shift our priorities from the acute short-term hospital of today to environments that will make it possible for society and systems to benefit from the practice of authentic occupational therapy. We must free ourselves to discover the rich potential of doing, of occupation. I believe that the demands, priorities, and operational philosophy of the medical and health care systems of today are such that our identity and survival as a unique, emerging profession is at high risk if these environments remain our principle focus.

A paradigm for responding to the concerns, needs, and welfare of a population without disabilities and illness comprises major differences in orientation, attitudes, and knowledge base from the paradigm of treatment and medical rehabilitation. Our current theoretical and practice models will require alterations, new ones will need to be designed, and some existing models must be reserved for use in more circumscribed areas of specialization. This will involve considerable reorientation of our identity, how we view ourselves, how we define our territory, and how our colleague and client relationships emerge. We must examine our existing models for the contributions they can make toward extending our knowledge and vision.

There is an increasing awareness, within our profession, that our distinguishing characteristics are not to be found in what we know about body mechanics, holism, self-esteem, or even ADL! Rather, our uniqueness is in what we know and need to know about the history, the sociology, the culture, and psychology of occupations, and the dynamic dimensions of their performance imperatives. We must begin now to subject these perspectives to more thorough scrutiny and analysis.

This pursuit of a broader and different vision requires that we search for a clearer, less generalized description of what we mean by occupation. The ambiguities, idiosyncratic interpretations, and stereotypical classifications of the terms work, play, and leisure make understanding and clear communication elusive goals. Our present knowledge should give us the ability to move beyond these generalizations and to develop not one but several options for more explicitly defining and delineating the domains of occupation. The challenge of differing claims and theoretical constructs frequently leads to new understanding as well as refinement of the old and, furthermore, it tends to prevent premature closure of the question.

To move such dialogue forward, I urge that occupation be understood as...
the science of doing—An art and science that explains the meaning and defines the uses of occupation. As such, occupation must address as priorities the historic, sociocultural, economic, political, psychologic, cognitive, interpersonal, neuromotor, and neurophysiologic dimensions and metaphors of

- doing and engagement;
- occupations and activities and their relevance to person, to the self-other dynamic, and to environmental structure;
- personally relevant life styles; and
- the quality of life.

It is essential that we broaden and accelerate opportunities for our students, practitioners, and especially our educators to pursue such study. This pursuit involves seeking to understand the nature and meaning of occupations, of activities in their own right, not simply as therapeutic agents but as complex entities in and of themselves. A science of occupation should seek to explain how the realities of the characteristics and the symbolic language of activities have continued throughout history to shape the nature of societies and individual ways of living. Such study and resulting knowledge is crucial to comprehending occupation.

Closely related to the significance of understanding the reality-based and symbolic characteristics of an activity or occupation is the imperative to create a sound body of knowledge in reference to what I term the person–activity congruence. That congruence is the dynamics and the elements of the match of person to an occupation or activity. How do we explain, for example, your affinity or mine for certain activities, our disinterest in or even dislike for others? How do we explain what creates flow? (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)? To understand occupation, we must seek to explain the match between the characteristics of person and the characteristics of activities, and the force of this dynamic in triggering and sustaining motivation. I believe that this phenomenon comprises the essence of what occupation is all about and what the occupational scientist in our future will know and continue to explore.

The story of Peter (Fidler & Velde, 1999) illustrates the personal congruence dynamic quite well. This 7-year-old boy's aggressive, energy-driven stone throwing was a potential threat to children and staff members in a community playground. On close observation, Peter's actions seemed to demonstrate that his undivided attention was actually focused on practicing and perfecting his aim and agility, not on aggression against others. His fluid coordination was impressive. When challenged to hit a tennis ball against the clubhouse wall and to record his time in running the perimeter of the playground area, his behavior seemed magically transformed. The match of the activity characteristics with his innate skills, interests, and characteristics not only extinguished the stone throwing, but also, over time, gained for Peter the pleasure and the joy of being a competent tennis player and marathon runner.

When the person–activity congruence concept is extended to a group–activity congruence, a number of examples easily come to mind. Experiences such as a sense of cohesion, motivation, excitement, and joy emerge within a group when activity interests are shared and focused. Engagement in overnight canoe trips, camping, sailing in a regatta, managing a fund-raiser, putting on a puppet show, or being part of Habitat for Humanity are only some examples of a group–activity match that we all may have experienced at different times in our lives. As serious students of occupation, we must now ask how and why this happens. What can we learn about the congruence of groups with activities or occupations that will contribute to formulations of a science of occupation?

The impact of activities chosen to match the characteristics of a given group was illustrated in my work in a community center with a group of young teenage girls. The competitive drive, assertiveness, boundless energy, untamed exuberance, and cleverness of these girls was being played out in acts of harassment in school and in the neighborhood. Although their behavior had not had any truly serious consequences, it was certainly disruptive and anger producing to others.

Taught to play basketball, this "gang" became an organized, disciplined, cohesive team, competing successfully with similar teams throughout the city. This match of activity characteristics to the characteristics of the group resulted in a gang transformed into a team. The age appropriateness, sociocultural meaning, and relevance of this activity, its performance requirements of competitiveness, clever strategy, physical energy, and endurance were a perfect match with these girls. The positive nature of their redirected behaviors was reinforced by social approval, and a sense of mastery and achievement.

The impact of an activity match with a community is illustrated by a neighborhood-based initiative that was spurred by these girls. Instigated by their enthusiasm and interest, the parents of these girls were engaged and became successful in convincing the community center to acquire a vacant, falling-apart neighborhood house. The girls and their parents, with additional help from neighborhood residents and staff, rebuilt and refurbished this property, making it into a small attractive clubhouse. Pooling their skills and interests, the house became a place to meet, to cook, to exchange ethnic recipes, to learn and engage in crafts, music, games, and woodworking.

Neighborhood tensions that had existed for years began to be reduced, and a community began to emerge.

More recently, I became aware of a neighborhood project in the inner city of Baltimore. Conceived of and turned into reality by a policeman who remembered all too well his problems while growing up, this project offers teenagers and adults of the neighborhood a place to meet, to talk, to exercise, to make friends, and to share in an impressive variety of activities. Crime in this neighborhood has dropped significantly. As I listened to teenagers and adults describe what such engagement means to them and their families, I heard a poignant testimony to the meaning of doing, to such engagement in the lives of individuals, and to the development and nurturance of the vitality of a neighborhood. Are such initiatives not relevant to what we should and could be about?

The congruence, the match of activity characteristics with organizations, agencies, and institutions, should be another relevant and important domain of our concern. This focus holds a wealth of potential for examining occupation, although it remains strikingly unstudied. A science of occupation must indeed address the role of activities, of occupations in both creat-
ing and communicating about the human and nonhuman environment (Fidler & Bristow, 1992; Fidler & Velde, 1999). Activities comprise an environment and sharply reflect an organization’s, an agency’s, or institution’s character, expectations, attitudes, and attendant behaviors. We should be challenged by the question of the congruence of certain occupations to a given organization’s goals, philosophy, and operational behaviors. Activities do indeed explicate the performance imperatives of a setting.

The questions then are: Which activities are most representative of human needs such as autonomy, individuality, affiliation, predictability, and so forth; and what is and what should be the nature and extent of such activities in the environments of nursing homes, schools, organizations, family homes and the like (Fidler & Velde, 1999).

A few years ago, I published a book that described how many of the basic tenets of occupation, of doing, were applied to an institution and how such changes significantly transformed that institution (Fidler & Bristow, 1992). The match of activities, of occupations, to institutions is a powerful construct, a need waiting to be addressed, knowledge waiting to be discovered.

In my vision of tomorrow that stretches beyond our here and now, beyond our therapy model, I can envision the human occupational scientist, an occupationalist who will have a number of options for specialized study, research, and practice across a broad spectrum of opportunities. These options will include domains of at least the following:

- Services and programs of wellness, of prevention, of learning enhancement, and lifestyle counseling
- Community planning and design
- Organizational, agency, and institutional design and operations
- Treatment, restorative interventions, and rehabilitation

These occupationalists will have access to bodies of knowledge that will begin to explain the relationships of the roles and dynamics of occupations and activities to personally relevant life styles; to individuals, groups, and organizations; to the environment; and to the quality of life.

Indeed, the world beyond our therapy model offers the challenge of unlimited opportunities. Exploring this world, developing a credible science of occupation, and becoming occupational scientists are all very possible if we can free ourselves to look beyond the here and now, to extend our alphabet and add new language, and to seek new dimensions of being occupationalists.

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References