THE ISSUE IS

Dangers Inherent in the Partition of Occupational Therapy and Occupational Science

Occupational science, an outgrowth of occupational therapy, is an emerging basic science that has been defined as the systematic study of humans as occupational beings (Clark et al., 1991; Yerna et al., 1989). The research and theory development that emanates from occupational science is intended to enhance both the scholarly foundation and professional practice of occupational therapy (Clark, 1991; Clark et al., 1991). As occupational science expands, new insights concerning the nature of occupation and the manner in which it enriches people’s lives are expected to emerge; such insights will spur the development of improved therapeutic techniques and thereby generate important yields both to the profession and to the clients whom it serves. In recognition of this rich potential, the American Occupational Therapy Foundation recently provided funding to establish an occupational science-based Research Center at the University of Southern California to promote the study of occupation and its relationship to adaptation and the challenges of aging and disability.

In the September 1992 issue of the American Journal of Occupational Therapy, Mosey argued for the necessity of a complete partition (i.e., separation) of occupational therapy from occupational science. In support of this position, she contended that the focus of scientific inquiry in occupational therapy (the development of frames of reference used to guide practice) differs from the purpose of occupational science (the derivation of theories). Prescriptively, she maintained that occupational therapy should pursue applied research only, whereas occupational science should concern itself solely with basic research and not practical application. If the partition of occupational therapy and occupational science is not totally complete, then according to Mosey, several grave pitfalls exist, including a potential drain on occupational therapy’s personnel and monetary resources, confusion among occupational therapists over the identity of their profession, and the initiation of poorly focused research. On the basis of her reasoning, Mosey presented a series of recommendations designed to foster a complete partition between occupational therapy and occupational science. For example, she proposed that occupational science researchers should neither perform studies that seem to have immediate relevance to occupational therapy nor attempt to explicate the potential implications of their work for occupational therapy. Further, Mosey stated that the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) and the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) must withdraw their resources from the support of occupational science.

We disagree sharply with Mosey’s analysis. A careful consideration of her article reveals that her position is based on several unsound presuppositions and serious logical flaws. Our chief concerns are summarized below.

The Best Research Strategy for Occupational Therapy

First, it should be noted that, fundamentally, Mosey sought to answer the question of what is best for the field. Should it allocate personnel and monetary resources to basic research or to applied research? In answering this question, Mosey stated that scientific inquiry in occupational therapy centers on developing frames of reference, which are “integrates collections of theoretically based information, organized in such a way that they provide guidelines for problem identification and remediation as it relates to specified elements of the profession’s domain of concern” (p. 851). Although we agree that research that directly pertains to frames of reference is worthwhile and important to the profession, we also note that there is simply no reason whatsoever to limit research efforts exclusively to this domain.

Unfortunately, Mosey’s entire argument hinges on the unsubstantiated assumption that the field of occupational
therapy is better served by applied than by basic research. Although throughout her article she repeats her view that applied research is what is proper for occupational therapy, nowhere does she provide any reason why basic research on occupation might not in some circumstances be equally or even more valuable in promoting occupational therapy’s goals. The fallacy of Mosey’s stance can be illustrated with an example from the field of medicine. Basic research conducted by Fleming on the antibiotic properties of molds eventually led to the development of penicillin, a major breakthrough in clinical practice. Clearly, Fleming’s research had a major effect on medical practice, the ultimate yield of which far exceeded what would have been obtained had research been restricted to existing treatment approaches or frames of reference. Given this historical chain of events, it would be hard to conceive of the medical profession not having supported Fleming’s research program. Within the profession of occupational therapy, the research program of Ayres provides another example. Initial support of Ayres’s basic research on the sensorimotor substrates of academic abilities eventually led to the sensory integration frame of reference (Ayres, 1972, 1975). Without the pursuit of new basic knowledge designed to fuel its therapeutic endeavors, any given practice profession is in serious danger of stagnating or overlooking innovative treatment principles.

Recognizing the powerful potential contributions to practice that emanate from basic research, AOTF presently includes concerns that fall clearly on the side of basic inquiry in some of its stated research priorities. For example, the Foundation states: “Models of healthful adaptation by well, ill, and disabled individuals need to be developed. Research is needed to explore the relationship of occupation to adaptation” (AOTF, 1990).

For more than 70 years, occupational therapists have been justly enthusiastic over their discovery of a rich vein of gold in the construct of occupation. Due to its fundamental character and its potential effect, occupation deserves to be studied in its own right, and consequently it would not be a surprising outcome if occupational science produced a wealth of information that led to major advances in the practice of occupational therapy. The mere possibility of such an outcome refutes Mosey’s insistence on the absolute partition of occupational therapy and occupational science. Given the potential benefits of occupational science, it is prudent to let history play itself out, not to rule out in advance and by fiat a direct therapy-facilitating role for occupational science. In the long run, the act of partitioning occupational therapy and occupational science is likely to seriously mitigate the vitality of the profession by robbing it of critical new insights that could enhance practice.

To a large degree, Mosey undercut her own position when she admitted that occupational science has the potential, perhaps even more so than other disciplines, to contribute to the theoretical undergirding that is fundamental to practice and to the development of valid frames of reference. If this is so, then why should the profession not support occupational science research and theory building? Also, on what grounds is applied research judged to be more crucial, given that theoretical advances in occupational science could revolutionize existing frames of reference? To validly conclude that a given type of research (i.e., basic or applied) is more beneficial to the profession would require a careful comparison of the ultimate yields of the two approaches, but Mosey failed to offer such an analysis.

As Mosey correctly pointed out, disciplines other than occupational science contribute to the development of occupational therapy frames of reference. However, in discussing this fact, she underestimated the relative potential contribution of occupational science. Within existing scientific disciplines, research and theory on occupation tend to be scattered and poorly synthesized (University of Southern California Department of Occupational Therapy, 1989), largely because the focus of such endeavors is not intentionally organized around the construct of occupation, but rather around some further intradisciplinary-specific concern. By setting out explicitly to study occupation, as well as through its historical roots in occupational therapy, occupational science is likely to provide a better integrated, more therapeutically applicable product. For example, in contrast to other disciplines, most occupational science researchers are (and are in the future expected to be) either occupational therapists or persons who are sympathetic to the values and needs of the occupational therapy profession; therefore, their research on occupation will be more directly targeted toward practice considerations than, for example, sociologically-based research that touches on occupation. Further, due to our overt focus on occupation as an organizing construct, efforts to synthesize existing literatures around the theme of occupation will be undertaken within occupational science. The end result will be a superior base of knowledge about occupation than is possible to gain by relying exclusively on outside disciplines.

Basic Versus Applied Research

Mosey’s argument about the need for partition is also incorrectly founded on the assumption that the distinction between basic and applied research is always clear cut and airtight. If this strict dichotomy is not maintained, then research that is primarily basic may contribute to therapeutic enhancements and, by implication, the results of occupational science research should not be excluded as a source of direct recommendations for occupational therapy.

In contrast to Mosey, the majority of authors emphasize that the basic versus applied distinction represents a continuum, and not an absolute dichotomy. For example, Polit and Hungler stated that “it is perhaps more meaningful to think of applied and basic research as two endpoints on a continuum, because in a given study there may be multiple goals and multiple lessons” (1991, p. 21). They also noted that in both nursing and medicine “the feedback process between basic and applied research seems to operate more freely than in the case of other disciplines” (p. 20). We suggest further that this feedback process is also important in occupational therapy, and maintain that the partition of occupational therapy and occupational science would under-cut the positive effects of this interplay. Recently, Hoshman and Polkinghorne (1992) argued against the tradition of strict partitioning in psychology. They
recommended that basic and applied research be reframed as interlinking systems, a reform that they believe would result in the generation of basic research that is less fragmented and more relevant to practice.

Potential Effects of Occupational Science’s Growth on the Field of Occupational Therapy

We feel that Mosey exaggerated greatly when she speculated that such outcomes as occupational therapists’ confusion over the identity of their own discipline or the pursuit of poorly focused research would result if occupational therapy and occupational science were not completely divorced. It is hard to imagine, for example, that members of the profession will lose sight of their mission merely because a minority of the occupational therapists in academic settings systematically studies occupation within the framework of occupational science. Likewise, Mosey’s fears about monetary and personnel drains are unwarranted. To the extent that occupational science is successful, some promising persons in the field will indeed participate in occupational science. However, given that occupational science meaningfully contributes to the success of occupational therapy, such a situation would be quite healthy and desirable. In fact, it is possible to stand Mosey’s argument on its head by stipulating that the complete partition of occupational therapy and occupational science would divert the labor needs of the profession away from a key area in which resources are needed (viz., systematic basic research and theory development on the topic of occupation).

With respect to financial considerations, it should be stressed that, counter to Mosey’s implications, the American Occupational Therapy Foundation in no way directly funds occupational science. Instead, the Foundation funds specific occupational science projects only to the extent that they are judged to be meritorious in fulfilling previously mandated AOTF objects and goals. In this regard, the enactment of Mosey’s call for the withdrawal of AOTA/AOTF funding from occupational science would necessitate a substantial revision of both the philosophy and content of AOTA/AOTF priorities, which were established independently of occupational science.

In conclusion, we note that Mosey’s specification for occupational therapy research (applied inquiry centered on frames of reference) logically excludes all types of basic science-oriented research, not just occupational science. A perusal of recent volumes of the American Journal of Occupational Therapy reveals that scholarly research and theoretical efforts that exemplify the basic side of the applied-basic continuum are increasingly present in the literature (e.g., Bakshi, Bhambrani, & Madill, 1991; Janelle, 1992; Larson, 1990; Licht & Nelson, 1990; Liu, Gauthier, & Gauthier, 1991; Mulcahey, 1992). To be consistent, Mosey must mandate that these and similar efforts should not qualify for funding from the American Occupational Therapy Foundation and, further, that their potential implications for the practice of occupational therapy should not be sought or discussed. By eschewing the potentially therapeutic benefits that accrue from such work, the restrictive policy advocated by Mosey could ultimately be extremely damaging to the profession.

References