The Issue Is

Enhancing the Research Image of Occupational Therapy

To demonstrate that the image of the research function of occupational therapy is weak, I shall first address the general image of occupational therapy. I doubt that anyone would question the notion that many people fail even to recognize the existence of occupational therapy. In a recent movie based on the life of former occupational therapist Dian Fossey, physical therapy was substituted for occupational therapy because, I assume, it was believed that the general public would not be familiar with occupational therapy. From my conversations with hundreds of persons in other fields who wish to enter the discipline of occupational therapy at the graduate level, I believe the following statement is a summary of the general image of occupational therapy for those persons who are aware that it exists: Occupational therapy is a helping profession in which the therapist works with patients to increase the patients' independence. The emphasis is solely on the service function of our field. I certainly have no desire to deemphasize this aspect.

On the other hand, we as occupational therapists know that, regardless of the importance of patient intervention, occupational therapy involves more than service. The research function of occupational therapy has become increasingly visible, as shown by the Occupational Therapy Journal of Research, the Academy of Research, the increased funds for occupational therapy research made available by the American Occupational Therapy Foundation, and the special section for research articles in the American Journal of Occupational Therapy. Research is a vital future objective (Gillette, 1991b). The issue in our field is not whether research should be conducted, or even whether society in general should be made aware of this function. The issue is not whether the research image of occupational therapy should be enhanced. The issue is, how can this image be enhanced?

There is a healthy opposition of research views in occupational therapy. The contrast in perspectives of therapists from the University of Southern California (Clark et al., 1991) with those from Boston University (Henderson et al., 1991) illustrates this kind of opposition. Therefore, diversity of opinion as to how to enhance the research image of our field may indeed be valuable. I am proposing three ways that I believe are practical methods of enhancing the research image of occupational therapy.

First, there should be an increase in the number of postprofessional educational programs in occupational therapy that emphasize the production of occupational therapy researchers as an outcome goal. As Hersh (1991) pointed out, we have two postprofessional tracks, one designed to produce clinical specialists, the other to produce researchers. These two products may be attributed equal value by occupational therapy leaders, but a survey of potential graduate students (Thibodaux, 1987) showed a higher value placed on the outcome goal of being a clinical specialist. To increase the number of research-oriented graduate programs in occupational therapy, potential postprofessional students will need to acquire an interest in the outcome goal of being a researcher. One workable solution is to recruit students interested in becoming clinical specialists and convert them to researchers during their graduate education. This solution could blur the track concept of postprofessional occupational therapy education.

My second proposal for enhancing the research image of occupational therapy is clearly controversial. Until occupational therapists know, and have become known for, quality research involving traditional measurement and methods, innovations in research procedure should be kept to a minimum. By traditional measurement I mean the use in research of instruments that have been shown by studies to be reasonably valid and reliable for the particular subjects under study. I also mean investigations of attributes of measuring tools in studies designed specifically for that purpose. By traditional methods I refer to both qualitative and quantitative means of inquiry that have been found acceptable by researchers over time; I mean those ways of designing and conducting both descriptive and (quasi)experimental research that ensure logical and replicable answers to the specific research questions addressed. Such methods may involve all or some of, but are not limited to, the following components: operational definitions, descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, precise qualitative descriptions based on direct observations, control groups, and randomization. Many universities (as guardians of research standards) and granting agencies do not respect occupational therapy for its research expertise.

As Gillette (1991a) has pointed out,
due to the risk of not receiving funding, research methods are seldom developed by scholars dependent on outside funding for research. Because outside funding is virtually essential for major research projects, and occupational therapy is receiving little such funding (Boyle, Dunn, & Kielhofner, 1990), is it not idealistic to assume we can attract outside moneys with innovative procedures?

Many occupational therapists are creative thinkers, so it is not surprising that they would be interested in new ways of conducting research. Examples can be found in the current occupational therapy literature. Clark et al. (1991) stated that new methodologies as well as conventional methods will be used for research in occupational science. For occupational science, Carlson and Clark (1991) suggested use of methods combining aspects from quantitative and qualitative research methods, such as the innovative experience sampling method. Toglia (1989) emphasized assessment through a "dynamic investigation method" in which perceptual functions are evaluated within various contexts. Occupational therapists at the University of Illinois (Gillette, 1991a) are developing innovative measurement procedures. These are all exciting ideas and I do not suggest completely abandoning such work. However, unless occupational therapy becomes known for its expertise in traditional research to sophisticated researchers outside the field, research based on creative procedures evolved within occupational therapy or occupational therapy research using extraordinary procedures will be considered poor rather than innovative. I fear that this poor research image will result regardless of the traditional research expertise held by any individual occupational therapy innovator. In the world of science and intellect, it is a given that one must be firmly grounded in the old before attempting the new. Until occupational therapy is accepted as well grounded in the old research methodology, it is unlikely that the world of science will accept new research methods from it. In the interest of occupational therapy's research image, it might be best not to hurry into research innovation, but instead to continue to reinforce the works of its traditional researchers.

The third suggestion I offer to enhance the research image of occupational therapy is to strengthen the research quality of the occupational therapy journals. Until the journals specific to occupational therapy are universally recognized for the rigor of their research articles, the research image of occupational therapy cannot be substantial. Again, I do not perceive the issue as the actual goal, but rather as how the goal is to be accomplished. There is a simple method of improving the research quality of occupational therapy journals, namely, that all data-based research articles by occupational therapists be submitted first to an occupational therapy journal. I have always submitted my research articles first to occupational therapy journals, but I know that as simple as this method sounds, the best research conducted by occupational therapists about occupational therapy may not be submitted first to occupational therapy journals for several reasons. After doctoral education in another discipline, some occupational therapists identify more strongly with their second field than with occupational therapy. People prefer the kind of prestige associated with being published in medical or psychological journals, and loyalty to one's discipline is an outmoded concept. Some universities do not consider occupational therapy publications of sufficient research quality to count toward tenure status, a major concern for occupational therapy faculty. Evaluations for awards (even occupational therapy awards) give considerable credit to occupational therapy researchers who have published in journals from other fields. Some occupational therapy researchers assume that occupational therapy research will only be read and respected if published by other disciplines, and that such publishing is the only way to enhance the occupational therapy research image. The latter assumption has to be false because I have had innumerable requests from eminent research settings worldwide for reprints of my research articles published only in occupational therapy journals. Were my research efforts the best in occupational therapy (which they are not), the research image of occupational therapy would be markedly enhanced.

There is undeniable merit in having occupational therapy research appear in journals of other fields, because acceptance of occupational therapy articles by other disci-
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