The Issue Is

Partition of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

Occupational science, as described by Clark et al. (1991), has emerged from occupational therapy. This emergence, referred to here as partition, has involved fashioning a discipline out of a profession. It has been a lengthy process requiring considerable thought and discussion. Because the formation of a discipline out of a profession seems to be without precedent in the scientific community, there are no historical examples to use as a guide in sorting out the advantages and disadvantages of such a move. We do not yet know what actions are necessary to ensure the long-term well-being of both the discipline and the profession from which it emerged.

Nevertheless, these issues are important and need to be examined. In this paper, I offer some initial ideas and suggestions regarding the partition of occupational science and occupational therapy.

Advantages of Partition

The partitioning of occupational science and occupational therapy presents many advantages. Three of these advantages, which are interrelated, seem of particular importance. First, partition allows for a clear distinction between the focus of scientific inquiry appropriate to occupational science and that appropriate to occupational therapy. There is recognition, or perhaps reinforcement of recognition, that theories and frames of reference are two distinct entities with their own structures and functions. They are formulated, refined, and evaluated with different forms of scientific inquiry.

Scientific inquiry in occupational science focuses on the development of theories that relate to phenomena within a described sphere of study. Theories are abstract descriptions of circumscribed sets of phenomena that delineate the characteristics of those phenomena and their relationships to each other.

Conversely, scientific inquiry in occupational therapy focuses on the development of frames of reference. Frames of reference are integrated 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 (Mosey, 1989).

The second advantage of partition is a clearer distinction between the form of scientific inquiry expected of occupational science and that expected of occupational therapy. Occupational science uses basic scientific inquiry, that is, it uses research designs and the methods of science, such as observation, reasoning, analysis, and interpretation, to formulate, refine, and test theories.

In contrast, occupational therapy uses applied scientific inquiry, which means it uses the methods of science and either theoretical information or research designs to formulate, refine, and assess the adequacy of frames of reference. Adequacy refers to the reliability and validity of the means used for problem identification and the safety, effectiveness, efficiency, and acceptability to clients of interactions employed for problem remediation. The continuing work on the sensory integration frame of reference is one example of applied scientific inquiry in occupational therapy; the current investigation of cognitive and perceptual frames of reference is another.

The third and perhaps most important advantage of partition is that both the discipline and the profession can now concentrate on their own work. Much time and energy has been devoted to the articulation of the nature of occupational science and occupational therapy as well as to the differentiation between the two. Some discussion devoted to clarification will continue, of course. However, it would seem that persons involved in occupational science can now give greater attention to further elucidating the nature of their discipline and to theory development. Occupational therapists can give greater attention to refining and assessing the adequacy of current frames of reference and to developing new frames of reference. Both can give more attention to the design and implementation of educational programs directed toward mastery of the content and scientific inquiry particular to each.

Disadvantages of Partition

If complete partition of occupational science and occupational therapy occurs, it would appear to have few disadvantages. The key word here is if. Complete partition would be characterized by each group perceiving itself as a distinct, independent entity with different goals and responsibilities.
Incomplete partition, however, would most likely be counterproductive for the following reasons: (a) An unhealthy dependence could develop in which occupational science relies on occupational therapy's personnel, monetary resources, and recognition value while occupational therapy mistakenly relies on occupational science to do the profession's scientific work, (b) there would be confusion as to whether occupational science/occupational therapy is a discipline, a profession, or some hybrid thereof; and (c) there is the possibility of indifferent, poorly focused scientific inquiry due to the lack of distinction between basic and applied scientific inquiry.

Any attempt to integrate occupational science and occupational therapy in education or in scientific inquiry is likely to impede development of the theoretical body of knowledge of occupational science and the applied body of knowledge of occupational therapy.

Achievement and maintenance of complete partition now will eliminate the necessity of struggling with it later, when it is likely to be far more difficult. Here, historical precedent provides a cautionary lesson. The discipline of psychology and the profession of psychology have been engaged in the process of separation for some time (Dorken & Associates, 1986). Much attention has been given to the definition, form, and focus of scientific inquiry as well as to the education appropriate to the discipline and the profession. Persons involved in the partition of psychology are finding this to be an arduous, distressing task. It is a task occupational science and occupational therapy can avoid by attending to complete partition now.

Although no one knows the most expedient way of ensuring complete partition of occupational science and occupational therapy, there may be some actions that would facilitate the process. These actions are outlined below.

Suggestions for Occupational Science

In seeking legitimacy, occupational science must turn away from occupational therapy and toward other disciplines. A discipline's source of legitimacy rests with the recognition and acceptance of other disciplines. Other disciplines will judge the worth of occupational science as a discipline, ultimately giving or withholding the support it requires for continued viability. Neither the profession of occupational therapy nor any other profession can give legitimacy to the discipline of occupational science.

Occupational science must ensure that it does not become an appendage of occupational therapy. It must also avoid evolving into a service unit for the profession. While in its current formative period, occupational science should refrain from addressing questions that appear to have immediate relevance to occupational therapy or any other profession. Such questions may be examined later when the discipline is more secure in its identity as a discipline.

The basic scientific nature of inquiry in occupational science should be readily, if not blatantly, apparent in any reports of scientific inquiry. This will be particularly important in the immediate future when persons in the discipline and in the profession are sorting out the differences between basic and applied scientific inquiry.

Occupational science should not concern itself with the application of theoretical knowledge. Reports of research projects should not end with possible applications, but rather, with interpreting findings as they relate to the articulated conceptual framework (Clark et al., 1991), or the emerging theories of the discipline.

Preparation for occupational scientists should be disassociated from professional and postprofessional education for occupational therapists. Like other disciplines, occupational science needs its own educational programs, beginning at the baccalaureate level. The prerequisite knowledge and skills needed for graduate study in occupational science are unlikely to be mastered in professional programs designed for the education of occupational therapists.

Additionally, occupational science students should be recruited from outside of the profession. This is a practical matter. Currently, only a few occupational therapists seem to be interested in or have the time available to become scientists in occupational therapy. If occupational science draws from this limited pool, there is likely to be even fewer persons who elect to learn and do the scientific work essential to the well-being of occupational therapy. Moreover, recruitment of occupational therapists into educational programs for occupational science may lead to unnecessary competition and conflict between the discipline and the profession.

Suggestions for Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapy must realize that occupational science is not responsible for, nor can it do, the scientific work of the profession. The focus and form of scientific inquiry in occupational science is inappropriate to the kind of scientific inquiry necessary for the continued viability of occupational therapy. It is the scientists within occupational therapy who must do the scientific work of the profession, that is, to develop, refine, and assess the adequacy of frames of reference.

Moreover, occupational therapy must recognize that occupational science cannot provide all of the theoretical information needed to support and enhance clinical practice, and it should not be expected to do so. Although occupational science will probably contribute to the theoretical foundation of the profession in the future, occupational therapy will still be responsible for keeping informed about, and drawing on, the theoretical information developed in other disciplines.

Working relationships with those disciplines that currently provide theoretical support for practice must continue to be formed and fostered. It is within these relationships that the specific theoretical information required for establishing particular frames of reference can be developed.

Organization of knowledge in the profession must be such that it facilitates applied scientific inquiry. Comprehensive conceptual frameworks, such as the type suggested by Christiansen (1990), may be suitable for the initial or continuing work of a discipline, but, they are unlikely to be useful in the scientific work of occupational therapy.

Historical prejudice and the relative newness of applied scientific inquiry as part of science has resulted in considerable neglect, misunderstanding, and depreciation of this form of scholarly activ-
Melsen, 1961). Indeed, because they are attitudes toward applied scientific inquiry. Occupational therapy must come what it is: scholarly work of great value and students are likely to be confused.

Until occupational therapy acquires a more positive attitude toward applied scientific inquiry, the scientific work of the profession will be given insufficient attention, and instruction in such work will be inadequate. Moreover, there will be a tendency to drift toward the basic scientific inquiry of occupational science because of the perceived higher status of basic inquiry and, in general, a greater understanding of how to engage in basic inquiry. Occupational therapy will develop adequate frames of reference, addressing all aspects of its domain of concern, only through becoming knowledgeable about applied scientific inquiry and recognizing the importance of such inquiry.

Postprofessional education in occupational therapy at both the master’s and doctoral level should be designed to guide students in acquiring the knowledge and skills that are fundamental to applied scientific inquiry. Such programs should not, and must not, become watered-down versions of programs designed to teach the content and basic inquiry of occupational science. Postprofessional education should be just that—postprofessional; it should not be education in a scientific discipline. The differences are considerable. Without a clear distinction between postprofessional education in occupational therapy and education in the discipline of occupational science, faculty and students are likely to be confused about the philosophy and goals of education, requisite content, and the end product of their scientific work.

A Final Suggestion

Complete partition of occupational science and occupational therapy will occur only when their resources are separated. Occupational science must have its own forums for information dissemination, such as scholarly journals and conferences sponsored by the discipline. It must also have financial support for its scientific inquiry. This should be accomplished with funding that is provided from sources other than occupational therapy. Therefore, in the near future, both the American Occupational Therapy Association and the American Occupational Therapy Foundation must start withdrawing their resources from occupational science. This should be done in a planned way, with a termination date agreed on by the parties involved. I make this suggestion for two reasons: (a) Occupational therapy cannot afford to use its limited resources to support a discipline when such resources are sorely needed to further the scientific work of the profession; and (b) by continuing to give some of the profession’s resources to occupational science, occupational therapy is fostering incomplete partition. This is detrimental to both occupational science and occupational therapy.

Suggesting the timely withdrawal of resources from occupational science in no way implies a lack of regard for or a lack of interest in occupational science. Occupational therapy is likely to have a closer relationship with occupational science than with any other discipline that provides theoretical information fundamental to practice. Nevertheless, partition must be complete if both occupational science and occupational therapy are to engage productively in the particular scientific work for which they are each responsible.

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References


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