LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Barton Responsible for the Term Occupational Therapy

Dr. Bing’s response to my letter (March 1987 issue, pp. 192–193) regarding the source of the term occupational therapy is a scholarly review of historical documents. However, I believe he misinterpreted my point. I am aware that our profession has a long history described in many terms, including occupational therapy, therapeutic activity, and invalid occupation. It is the use of the precise term “occupational therapy” that I ascribe to Barton. Interestingly, Dr. Bing affirms my conclusions when he states, “Barton countered with occupational therapy, preferring the adjectival form of the word” (p. 193). The use of this form was adopted by the National Society for the Promotion of Occupational Therapy when the profession was founded, resolving the debate between Slagle, Barton, and Dunton that is extensively documented in the AOTA archives. While the profession grants Dunton credit for his many contributions, we might wish to acknowledge Barton for the precise name by which we are known.

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Naturalistic Versus Scientific Inquiry

I’m not quite comfortable with the first two articles on research that are part of an ongoing series in the Nationally Speaking column of the journal (Gilfoyle & Christiansen, 1987; Christiansen, 1987).

“Science” and “Research” are repeatedly used synonymously.Scientism is presented as the path to knowledge: “Only through scientific inquiry can occupational therapy develop as an academic discipline” (Gilfoyle & Christiansen, p. 7) and “through this series of essays, we invite you, our members, to become better informed about the many dimensions of scientific inquiry” (Gilfoyle & Christiansen, p. 8).

Further, the implication is made that the value of clinical practice is totally dependent on its scientific base, or, in the authors’ words, “the scientific practice base necessary for professional excellence” and “a commitment to inquiry, knowledge development, and responsible (scientifically based) clinical practice” (p. 7).

I would submit that there is much more to research and practice than this. The dominant research paradigm of scientism is powerful and demands respect; but I would prefer that occupational therapy not carry this respect to the extreme by lying prostrate at its feet! Research methodologies derived from the naturalistic paradigm are also powerful and arguably more appropriate for addressing research questions that relate to human behavior processes and meanings. Naturalistic inquiry is rigorous inquiry, but it is not “scientific.” It is based on a different set of assumptions about the nature of reality, namely that we live in a world of multiple realities and that all “parts” of reality influence all other parts. Hence we cannot divide our world into independent manipulable variables; nor can we arrive at enduring truth statements for generalizations that are context-free (Guba, 1981). The goal of naturalistic inquiry is not predictability through verification but descriptive analysis through discovery. I think it is important that the language we use in promoting research reflects a breadth of understanding of the many paths to knowledge that exist. Each path has its own particular strengths and weaknesses, and each also has its own potential for contributing to the field of occupational therapy.

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References


Study of Truth Is Part of Philosophical Inquiry

The research series initiated in the Nationally Speaking department, beginning with “Research: The Quest for Truth and the Key to Excellence” by Elnora M. Gilfoyle and Charles H. Christiansen (January 1987, pp. 7–8) is commendable. The subsequent essays will address many issues important to the profession.

My major concern is what is implied by the title, “Research: The Quest for Truth...” The authors seem to be confused about the difference between scientific inquiry and philosophical inquiry. Scientific inquiry is concerned with identifying and describing the relationship between empirical phenomena—phenomena that can be or have the potential of being measured.

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