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letter (March 1987 issue, pp. 192–193) regarding the source of the term *occupational therapy* is a scholarly review of historical documents.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, 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 National 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 “paths” of reality influence all other parts. Hence we cannot divide our world into independent manipulable variables; nor can we arrive at enduring truths 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.
Scientists seek to develop theories and determine the degree to which various theories accurately reflect some aspect of the empirical world. The goal of science is to make predictions.

Truth is not an empirical phenomenon. Similar to such phenomena as 'knowledge' and 'meaning,' 'truth' cannot be measured. The study of truth is in the purview of philosophical inquiry. The goals and methods of philosophical inquiry, unlike scientific inquiry, are designed to consider nonempirical phenomena.

Scientific inquiry can assist us in refining those theories that now constitute our body of knowledge, in developing new theories, and in determining the effectiveness of the application of our various frames of reference. Philosophical inquiry, on the other hand, can assist us in studying the philosophical assumptions now considered to be fundamental to our profession and in identifying a possible need for an altered or different set of assumptions. Philosophical inquiry can also facilitate the further development of our ethical code.

Scientific inquiry and philosophical inquiry are of equal importance to the profession and to helping the society to which we are responsible. However, the two are not the same.

As we consider the role of research in our profession, may we be both temperate and humble in our goals. Let us define these goals more clearly and realize the limitations of research. We will not find truth through research.

In addition, as we address the role of research in our profession, it is important to remember that we are dealing with a philosophical issue.

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Author’s Reply

I appreciate the obvious thought and genuine concern that went into these comments about the current Nationally Speaking series on research. In each case, the authors have made valid arguments when viewed in the context of their individual or preferred definitions of the words truth and science.

In the tradition of general semantics, however, it is well known that the meaning of words is found not in the words themselves, but in our reactions to them. This may help to explain why some scholars hesitate to define terms such as truth and science. Accordingly, while Dr. Mosey can rightly claim that truth is outside the purview of science, many scientists would assert that truth for them is that which can be empirically verified. This does not deny the importance of metaphysical or philosophical phenomena, nor does it imply that the search for 'truth' in the philosophical context is not important to the development of the field of occupational therapy.

Similarly, Ms. Hasselkus has assumed that our definition of scientific inquiry is a narrow one, which excludes the so-called "naturalistic" methods of inquiry and ignores the importance of unobservables such as context, feeling, or the so-called phenomenological realities. This inference is incorrect.

Our use of the term science was intended in a more heuristic or dynamic sense. In a heuristic view of science, the issues of problem solving and discovery are of principal importance, not the methodologies or the ultimate uses to which knowledge will be put. While some readers may disagree with our use of terminology, I suspect that many will concur that one important and noble aim of science is to explain natural phenomena through theory. If we agree on this point, we share common ground for continuing the important and necessary activities of inquiry that lie before us as responsible service providers, regardless of how those activities are labeled.

The crucial point is this: We have come to the time in occupational therapy when making a difference is not enough. If we hope to develop (or survive) as an organized discipline, we must be able to explain how we made a difference. It is to this assertion that the present series is dedicated.

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