At the American Occupational Therapy Association Annual Conference in Philadelphia, I found myself among many colleagues who described themselves as occupational scientists. This raises three interesting questions: Have some occupational therapists become embarrassed by the word “therapist”? Have some therapists in their desire to accept the word occupation decided to sever it from the word therapist? What makes a therapist different from a scientist?

What does it mean to be an occupational therapist? During my many years in this profession, I have often been struck by the defensiveness of many occupational therapists about their professional title. I remember in the late 1970s and early 1980s when many members of the profession suggested that we should actually change the name of the profession. Even before that time, professional label changes were discussed. Some members felt that the label “occupational therapy” was not recognized by members of the public and did not reflect our expertise or domain of concern. At that point in time, most were concerned with the word “occupation” and believed that we should adopt a term that more accurately reflected the purpose of the profession. At that time, we were proud to be therapists; we were insecure about being occupational therapists. It appears that this debate has reemerged, but now with the concern being whether we should be “therapists.” In our new found acceptance of the core of occupation, many appear to want to attach it to something else.

Therapist versus scientist: What does it take to be a scientist? A scientist “is an expert who studies or works in one of the sciences…a person learned in science and especially natural science: A scientific investigator” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 2001). Scientists engage in various forms of inquiry and study phenomena to answer specific questions. It is true that a profession could have scientists who are concerned only with the knowledge base of the profession (Mosey, 1998). In the case of occupational therapy, these scientists could be occupational scientists or “occupationalists” (parallel to chemists, physicists, or biologists, for example) if their primary focus is the study of occupations. The expectations related to this title are many. What is required of a person who calls himself a scientist? Occupational scientists must have the appropriate knowledge and skills to engage in inquiry and must see their major responsibilities as those of scientists. “Scientists” responsibilities include ongoing research, presentation of findings both written and verbal, and engaging in scholarly debates grounded in human occupation. Occupational scientists may have significantly different roles and responsibilities than do occupational therapists. Given this and the previously described characteristics and responsibilities, it appears that this would probably be a very small set of persons.

Can occupational therapists be scientists? Yes, of course, but as defined, each descriptor has its own unique requirements, expectations, and duties. Therapists are persons “trained in methods of treatment and rehabilitation other than the use of drugs or surgery” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 2001). Occupational therapists provide theory-based interventions that permit clients to lead independent, productive, and satisfying lives. Occupational therapists are concerned with applying knowledge for the benefit of their clients. Scientists are concerned with research and examining, refining, developing, and evaluating the profession’s body (Abreu, Peloquin, & Ottenbacher, 1998). Occupational therapists must have as their primary concern the client’s needs and the appropriateness of the intervention plan. They must be altruistic, caring, empathic, and continually use themselves as a therapeutic agent for change. Occupational scientists’ primary concern is to understand the phenomena under examination, and they are not primarily concerned about the care of the client. As scientists, they must be objective, unbiased, impartial, and use inductive and deductive reasoning to answer questions.

Can one assume the role of therapist and scientist simultaneously? Possibly, but personally, I do not believe it is reasonable. The difference in focus raises several ethical issues, specifically concerning the rights and duties to others that are implied in each title. The ethical ideals requisite to each role are unique (Beauchamp & Childress, 1983; World Medical Association, 2000). Ethical conflicts occur when a person presumes to fulfill both roles simultaneously without providing necessary information to those with whom they interact. Therapists and scientists have different roles and

Jim Hinojosa

Jim Hinojosa, PhD, OT, FAOTA, is Professor and Chair, New York University, 35 West 4th Street, 11th Floor, New York, New York 10012; jh9@nyu.edu.
Can One Assume Both Roles at the Same Time?

While I view these roles as distinctive and separate, it is feasible and realistic that one could be both a therapist and a scientist. In this situation, I believe that the person must be extremely clear about which role he or she is playing at any particular time. When functioning as a therapist, the person's primary concern must be the client and addressing his or her needs. When functioning as a scientist, the person's primary concerns are investigating the phenomena of interest and maintaining the integrity of the selected method of scientific inquiry. Participants in the study are the means to answering a question. The person who assumes both roles must be clear about when he or she is a therapist and when he or she is a scientist. It should be noted that much of the knowledge and skills required for both roles overlap. For example, if one is using a sociological theory, a therapist could apply such knowledge within a context of guidelines for intervention to benefit a client. A scientist could use the same knowledge to examine a hypothesized relationship between phenomena.

The goal of all scientists is to add to the discipline's body of knowledge. A scientist uses the methods of science and research designs to answer appropriate questions. The research designs are protocols established by the scientific community that outline the collection and interpretation of quantitative and qualitative data (Mosey, 1996). Scientists concentrate on examining phenomena or answering a specific practical question with integrity.

The goal of all occupational therapists is to assist clients to live more meaningful lives. We create environments and provide interventions that bring about changes in the client's abilities to function in his or her natural world. We are agents for change. Activities, occupations, therapeutic use of self, the environment, technology, and psychological and social resources are all tools that we use as part of the intervention plans that we develop with and for clients. I believe that when we profess that we are occupational therapists, we are honestly describing the scope of our practice and overall concern with an individual's ability to engage in occupations.

Reflecting on Philadelphia, I began to think—has "therapist" become a negative word? Has the label "therapist" lost credibility? Why do so many of my colleagues call themselves occupational scientists or occupational scholars? Are these colleagues seeking increased status, recognition and acceptance, attributes that are not intrinsic to the word "therapist"? I hope not. As occupational therapy continues to evolve, members will have diverse responsibilities and roles, some will be scholars, others will be educators, some will be scientists—but, I hope, the vast majority of us will always be therapists. Being therapists means applying knowledge for the benefit of members of society. This is no easy task. Look at the complexity of basic professional education in occupational therapy. Consider the knowledge one needs to practice in today's world. We should be proud of our therapeutic role. I believe that we should be even more proud of the fact that we are therapists who deal with human occupation—occupational therapists. For me, I believe that we must keep in mind that we have the ultimate goal of ensuring that others can engage in meaningful occupations that provide value in their lives. ▲

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