Letter to the Editor

Re: Moyer C. From the research section editor's perspective. *Int J Ther Massage Bodyw.* 2008:1(1):7–9. http://www.ijtmb.org/index.php/ijtmb/article/view/11/16.

To the Editor:

Let me begin by gratefully acknowledging the work of the Foundation, the Editors, and all contributing parties on this landmark achievement. I am doubly thankful as it appears that the Journal, alongside its offering of peer-reviewed research and practitioner case reports, intends also to provide a forum for the necessary theoretical discussions that should inform the work of any community of researchers.

It is in this latter vein that I wish to respond to Prof. Moyer's editorial as printed in the inaugural issue.

I am not at all as sanguine as Prof. Moyer regarding the rehabilitation of the word "reduction." Nor do I share his view that the term "reduction" is in any way synonymous with the proposed equivalents—viz., "focus" and "narrowing." The choice to include the phrase "when properly understood" itself seems a tacit acknowledgement of the fact that over the course of the past century (and not merely "popularly"), the understanding of the relationship between "the methods of science" and "reduction" has in fact *not* moved in that direction. Rather, the confusion of terms has persisted and has resulted in both being held suspect. Given the history of the word, I cannot follow him in accepting the term "reduction" as a neutral placeholder for the set of procedures that "scientists do."

The methods of science are not—on the whole—most aptly characterized by the term "reductionism," or as being "reductive," and it seems doubly problematic to suggest so during a discussion of its application in relation to persons. The "methods of science" are not a unified body of techniques and approaches, but rather refer generally to the use of deductive and inductive reasoning applied not only to the results but, optimally, in the generation of hypothesis, experimental design, and procedure. Such efforts are not themselves "reductionistic" because they cannot be other than they are and still be "science." What can be characterized as reductionistic, or "reductionism," is the making of the move from the data derived from such procedures to then saying that *nothing more than* what is happening in a given experiment (based on a particular idealization of a given phenomena) is what *is* occurring, or *is at bottom* the case. In other words, to be guilty of the charge of being "reductionistic" is to be ideologically committed to certain metaphysical presuppositions which in some sense can be said to have either an explanatory or ontologic priority over both the phenomenon under investigation *and* the empirical data resulting from an experiment carried out upon a purportedly well-defined problem. It is the metaphysical claim that phenomena at one "level" can be completely understood by the explanation of phenomena at a "lower level."

I want to suggest that there is a substantive difference between the methodologic necessity to "operationalize" a problem or definition and "reduction" itself. Proponents of the philosophic position that links understanding with reduction in science have, historically, failed to account for the distorting idealization that accompanies experimental research into phenomena. While not an absolute danger (a view that Prof. Moyer rightly endeavored to counter), it nonetheless remains a significant concern.

Prof. Moyer writes, "It is only by *reducing* the focus to a specified level that some understanding of the whole can be approached." However, this statement does seem to be begging the question. With reference to the example of "love in *Homo sapiens*," what is the "specified level" appropriate to gaining an understanding on the level love is sought to be understood? By this example, we recognize that the central question before researchers remains: What philosophic and methodologic position shall be used to "specify" a level beyond which explanation is reductive or, conversely, sufficient? How do researchers intend to go about drawing the line between what is and what is not a "significant part" of the "whole," given that, historically, truly "reductive" practices have made it appear almost as a species of non-sense to make a case for the types of understanding relevant to some of our deepest concerns as therapists and as persons? That things are "to a greater or lesser extent greater than the sum of [their] parts" does not help us answer this question: When does our study cease to be of the thing in question and become merely some other thing, the findings regarding which we try to interpret with respect to the original investigation?

Perhaps I will be seen to have put too fine a point on matters that were not Prof. Moyer's main concern. However, open debate on such questions would have the advantage of helping to avoid the immanent tragedy of hoisting ourselves upon a petard of our own making in adopting language and standards of validity

that do not respect the complexity of how we practice. Though we must keep practice with Ockham's razor, we must also not be too hasty in limiting what "counts" in our clinical experience lest a necessary and unique dimension of practice be unwittingly thrown out—a dimension that other health care professions, with varying degrees of candor, themselves lament having sacrificed.

Such questions will also weigh upon the kind of motives that we are permitted to sensibly ascribe to others; even the DeBakey's of the world.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST NOTIFICATION

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