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A Qualitative Examination of Optimal Professional Traits of Physical Therapists. – An Exploratory Investigation

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**A Qualitative Examination of Optimal Professional Traits of Physical Therapists. –
An Exploratory Investigation**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
The School of Health and Kinesiology

By:
Nicholas G. Wood

Under the Mentorship of Dr. Daniel Czech

ABSTRACT

Physical therapists are constantly searching for aspects of their professional practice to improve, in order to enhance interactions with patients, eventually leading to a more successful practice (Resnek & Jensen, 2003). Although this is the case, limited research has been found which has examined optimal qualities of physical therapists from neither a qualitative perspective, nor based upon their location. Thus, the purpose of this study is to use a qualitative approach to describe optimal qualities necessary for a successful physical therapy practice. In addition, this study aims to determine if therapists practicing in a rural community describe different qualities than therapists practicing in a metropolitan area. The study found that effective communication skills, deeper relationships, vast knowledge and the ability to teach it, a motivating mentality and a calm demeanor are essential professional traits for physical therapists. There were no major differences in professional traits between rural and metropolitan areas.

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A Qualitative Examination of Optimal Professional Traits of Physical Therapists. – An
Exploratory Investigation

Physical therapists are constantly searching for aspects of their professional practice to improve in order to enhance interactions with patients, eventually leading to a more successful practice. Just as in any career, there are thought to be optimal qualities of physical therapists that create a positive atmosphere in the clinic that fosters excellence. The ability to effectively inform the patient of their ailment and therapeutic regimes in simple terms is considered to be an optimal quality of a physical therapist (Grannis, 1981). Another essential trait involves certain personable skills, such as respect, cheerfulness and understanding.

There is current research that highlights optimal qualities of physical therapists but none focus on those in rural areas. Attracting and keeping professionals in rural health care is currently a major concern in the United States due to the inability to access large supports and the lack of opportunities for professional growth (Roots & Li, 2013). There is a notion that if the essential skill sets, knowledge and decision making abilities of those who are considered to be expert therapists can be identified, that they can then be taught and practiced in order to positively benefit potential or even current physical therapists (Resnek & Jensen, 2003). If a prospective physical therapist knows what is required of an expert, they can decide if the career is for them and then begin implementing those optimal qualities into their habits. The purpose of this study is to use a qualitative approach to decipher what physical therapists consider to be the optimal qualities necessary for a successful practice. This study aims to determine if therapists practicing in a rural community must possess different qualities than therapists practicing

in a metropolitan area in order to help people better prepare for their future job in a smaller town.

The topic of physical therapy has been researched enough to have its own theory of professional practice. Jensen conducted a plethora of research and developed the Theory of Expert Practice in Physical Therapy, which outlines necessary traits for expert practitioners. The theory is broken down into four key sections in order to make it more understandable. Jensen states that the therapist must possess a broad and deep knowledge of the therapeutic field not only from schooling but also from everyday experiences with patients (Jensen et al., 2000). The therapist must then be able to implement this knowledge using clinical reasoning to work alongside the patient in order to make the best clinical decisions possible. Clinical reasoning is important for the therapist to use proper judgment in helping the patient structure goals for rehabilitation progress and developing successful health strategies for their life (Higgs & Jones, 2000). The third aspect requires the therapist to have mastered movement of the human body, being able to palpate, observe and manually guide the patient flawlessly while focusing on the emotions and expressions of the patients (Jensen et al., 2000). Finally, Jensen feels that the therapist must display consistent virtues, always longing to obtain new knowledge and keeping the patient first through respect and a caring nature.

Many studies have been conducted to identify optimal qualities of physical therapists that are crucial for a successful practice. One of the most prominent reoccurring themes involves the relationship between the therapist and patient. Leopold states that the relationship is even more important than the actual treatment because the therapist's feelings, attitudes and behaviors greatly influence the patient (Leopold, 1954).

Therefore, the therapist must be optimistic and positive around patients, always smiling and striving to keep the patient cheerful (Jacobson, 1980). Having a good sense of humor also creates a pleasant atmosphere that motivates the patient (Edwards et al., 2004). The therapist must be able to motivate and empower the patient, encouraging them to work to their fullest capacity but always reminding them of their limitations (Resnik & Jensen, 2003).

In order to convey directions to the patient, the therapist must partake in a teacher role. The therapist has to deliver clear, concise instructions, making sure to speak in simple language that the patient can understand (Grannis, 1981). Since events do not always go as planned in the medical field, a good therapist must be able to adapt or improvise, making sure to deliver the most effective and personal care to each patient (Jensen et al., 1992). The therapist must be able to hold normal, everyday conversations during treatment and observation (Jensen et al., 1990). This will make the patient comfortable and relaxed, allowing the therapist to observe their natural reactions and expressions, helping the therapist gather a more realistic evaluation. The most reoccurring quality throughout the literature is that the therapist must be extremely caring and always express utmost concern for the patient (Grannis, 1981). When the patient feels the genuine care of the therapist, the relationship develops trust, which allows the therapist to be more influential over the patient.

In rural areas, healthcare professionals are more connected to the community. Therapists are considered a crucial access point, causing them to have close relationships with their patients, which could lead to more effective therapy (King et al., 2009). However, there is an ongoing problem in rural health involving the attraction and

retention of medical professionals. This could be in part due to the lack of a broad support structure, lower opportunities for personal development and fewer incentives (Roots, 2013). The lack of sources for furthering education may also keep therapists away from rural areas, since most of them long to increase their knowledge (King et al., 2009). There is a lot of ongoing research to discover effective methods of drawing medical professionals to rural areas.

A physical therapist must contain a variety of professional traits, including a foundation of knowledge, the ability to teach and a trust worthy relationship with the patient. Qualities such as optimism, humor, critical reasoning skills and empowerment all contribute to the success of their practice. This study aims to discover if there are any differences between metropolitan and rural therapists' responses on necessary qualities of physical therapists. If contrasts are discovered, light may be shed on the problem dealing with attraction and retention of physical therapists in rural healthcare.

Methodology

Physical therapists are constantly searching for aspects of their professional practice to improve, in order to enhance interactions with patients, eventually leading to a more successful practice. There is a plethora of research on the crucial qualities of physical therapists but none focus on their demographic location. This study aims to discover the differences and similarities of the opinions on the optimal professional traits of rural and metropolitan physical therapists. This section addresses the methodology of the study such as the selection of subjects, collection of data and the expectations of the research.

Participants

The participants for this study were five therapists from the largest cities in the state of Georgia and five therapists from rural towns in Georgia. A county is deemed to be rural as long as it is not in a metropolitan statistical area and has less than 50,000 people (King et al., 2010). The participants can have either a masters or doctorate degree in physical therapy and can be male or female.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted over the phone and the interviewer was in a private room at his residence. Each call was recorded, then transcribed by a professional service and reviewed by the interviewer. The participants were educated on confidentiality and signed an informed consent in order to participate.

Interview Protocol

The interviewer introduced himself and then gave a brief description of the study and asked questions following the format below:

This study is aimed to identify the optimal professional traits of a physical therapist, based on a physical therapist's personal opinion. I would like to ask you several questions on this subject.

1. Basic Information:
 - Name
 - Degree
 - Years Practiced
2. Describe the ideal physical therapist.

3. What are the most important qualities to have?
4. Describe how a physical therapist should interact with his/her patients.
5. Describe an ideal physical therapist's communication style.
 - Is it more important to have a business/shallow relationship or a deeper relationship with your patient?
6. Describe how a physical therapist can motivate patients during treatment.
7. How important do you view the teaching aspect in your practice?
8. Describe how a physical therapist should react in a stressful situation.
9. What are the strongest/most crucial factors that successfully affect your clinical practice?
10. Why did you choose a metropolitan/rural area? (depending on their location)
11. Do you think there are any differences in therapists in the two different locations?

Other questions may have been used in order to draw more information from the participant or to better explain the question.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed by an external, professional service. The transcripts were then reviewed to determine if any themes emerged. In this study, a quality had to be mentioned in 60% of the interviews to be considered a theme.

The research team was composed of the primary researcher and the primary researcher's faculty advisor. The inclusion of the faculty advisor contributed to the reliability and validity of this study.

This study implemented a qualitative approach to be used for analyzing the data that was adapted from Czech et al (2004) as outlined below.

- A. Approaching the interviews
 - Transcribing the interview*
 - Obtaining a grasp of the interview*
- B. Focusing the data
 - Bracketing the data*
- C. Reduction
 - *Eliminating the irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping data*
 - Verifying the elimination of the data*
- D. Releasing meaning
 - Forming categories*
 - Identifying themes*
 - Describing themes*

Results

Communication Skills

All ten physical therapists stated that communication skills were a crucial quality to have. Physical therapists have to communicate at all times with patients, the patients' family members, co-workers and numerous other health professionals in order to run their practice. One therapist stated, "Communication is really the key to understanding what the problems are and what they can do to help." Another therapist further emphasized the importance of effective communication by claiming, "If you have poor communication skills, number one your patients are not going to trust you, number two they are not going to believe you can fix them." Under the broader theme of communication skills, two subthemes emerged that were each also mentioned in at least 60% of the interviews.

Adaptability – Physical therapists deal with all different kinds of populations in their clinical practice, so they must be able to adapt their communication style for each situation. A therapist stated that adaptability is crucial because therapists "communicate

not only with the patient, with the family members and with other staff,” so you must be able to speak with each one. Another therapist remarked that they are “constantly having to toe the line between medical jargon with medical professionals, as well as putting things in layman’s terms for the everyday patient.”

Listening Skills- Physical therapists need to be able to listen and take in exactly what their patients are saying. If the therapist lacks listening skills, he or she could miss something that is going on with the patient. It is important for a therapist to “listen to what the patient is telling them to try to understand what could be going on outside of what’s happening in therapy.” If a therapist does not listen, “they may try to push their own thoughts on people where if they sit back and listen, they may have to change their minds.”

Deeper Relationships

Physical therapists constantly interact with patients throughout the day so they are constantly developing relationships. The majority of the therapists felt that the relationship must be deeper in nature. One therapist felt that the patient is “more willing to work for you and to buy in to what you’re telling them if you have more than a business relationship.” Another therapist stated that a deeper relationship is important because the client will “tend to get better once they get comfortable with you and trust you.”

Knowledgeable/Teaching Ability

The human body is a very complex system, so physical therapists must be very knowledgeable about their area of practice. One of the therapists bases his practice on an

“academic didactic type of preparation, which is of course ongoing, as well as empirical knowledge to base a patient’s treatment regimen.” Simply knowing the information is not enough; physical therapists must also be able to convey their knowledge to others. A therapist stated that “You’re teaching patients, you’re teaching staff, you’re teaching PTAs underneath you constantly.”

Motivating

One of the primary responsibilities of the physical therapist is to motivate their patients to perform to the best of their ability. In order to do this, “One thing physical therapists always do is set goals in their paperwork, but also they want to set those goals for something that the patient wants to obtain.” Once these goals are set, another way to motivate the patient is “just picking out, even if it’s small things, that they’ve done better from visit to visit so that they can see that they’re making progress.”

Calm Demeanor

Physical therapists often encounter stressful situations when dealing with patients and their co-workers. One therapist stated, “You need to be able to keep your calm. You need to not let the patient see that you’re stressed or scared of something.” When treatments do not go as planned, one therapist claims they respond by “staying as calm as possible and adapting to the situation as best you can.”

Discussion

The findings of this study showed that currently practicing physical therapists regarded the optimal physical therapist professional traits to consist of adequate

communication skills, deeper relationships with the patient, broad knowledge and the ability to teach that knowledge, ability to motivate and a calm demeanor. Communication was the only theme that consisted of subthemes but the other themes were composed of several important aspects.

Information on becoming a physical therapist, such as requirements for admission to schools, certification guidelines and job descriptions can easily be located on the internet. However, in order to discover actual qualities and professional traits of physical therapists, the search becomes more difficult because of the little available research. This study interviews therapists to discover those optimal traits and then to determine if there are any differences between rural and metropolitan physical therapists.

Without a doubt, effective communication skills were the most important quality and were mentioned in one way or another by every physical therapist interviewed. Since physical therapists interact with people in their everyday practice, this discovery seems very obvious. The therapists delved even further into the communication skills and spoke on two specific areas of being adaptable and being able to listen well.

On a daily basis, physical therapists have to encounter many segments of the population, including patients, patients' families, co-workers, medical sales representatives and other medical professionals, such as medical doctors or occupational therapists. In order to communicate effectively and efficiently in these different spectrums, the therapist must "be able to communicate to them in the way they wish to be spoken to." Just like Grannis stated in his article, it is adamant that therapists are able to adapt their communication to each situation so that they are conveying their message

appropriately and not speaking in jargon that the audience will not understand.

Communication adaptability is all “about finding those verbal tools to be able to make yourself understood” to each population.

In order to communicate proficiently, physical therapists must listen to what their patients are trying to convey. One way to practice listening is to “get a background of the patient, what their family is, so you work that rapport with them, so that they trust in you and feel like they are part of the healthcare, so that they feel like they’re included.”

Listening is also vital because physical therapists “need to be able to feel their patient out,” in order to determine how to communicate and interact with that patient. When the therapist listens closely to the patient, the physical therapist can better understand the patient’s situation and the patient will begin to trust the therapist more readily.

The second major theme that emerged was the importance of physical therapists having a deeper relationship with their patients. Similar to what Leopold discovered in his research, the physical therapists interviewed felt that deeper relationships led to more successful therapy treatments. One therapist claimed, “Unlike a lot of areas of medicine, you get to know the person pretty readily. By no means it’s (the relationship) not shallow, it’s pretty in-depth.” When a therapist learns the ins and outs of their patient, they know exactly what the patient wants and how to conduct those interactions. Another therapist felt that deeper relationships were pivotal to successful treatment because “If they don’t trust you, it doesn’t matter how good you are skills wise, they are not going to let you touch them.” A deeper relationship is so powerful that one therapist stated that even if the patient does not get better, they will “still come back to you because of the rapport that you’ve developed with them.”

In order to be a successful physical therapist, one must possess a vast knowledge of an array of subjects, such as anatomy and physiology just as Jensen et al. stated in their research. Since new research is constantly emerging, it is important for the therapist to always continue learning; one therapist said, “Once you get to the point that, as a therapist, you don’t need to learn anymore, then you’re not a good therapist.” When physical therapists are willing to stay up-to-date with current knowledge, they are able to provide their patients with the best treatment plans available.

Along with being very knowledgeable, physical therapists must be able to teach their patients about their situation, including diagnosis and the plan of treatment. When asked how important teaching was in their practice, a therapist stated, “I think it’s everything honestly... there needs to be an understanding in order for a patient to actually grasp the concept of physical therapy, move forward with it and to have some success with it.” If the patient does not fully understand their situation, they will not fully commit to the plan, causing them to fall short of their full potential. Several of the therapists use their teaching aspect as a sales pitch or marketing technique in order to get the patient to “buy in” to the treatment. One therapist stated, “You’re going to get your patient to be more compliant if they understand what’s wrong with them, why the problem exists and what needs to happen to make it better.”

Another major quality that a physical therapist must possess is the ability to motivate their patients on the road to recovery. Similar to what was stated by Resnek and Jensen, a therapist claimed, “You’ve got to make them believe that they can get better if they do it. If you encourage them to do it, they’ll get better. Almost like a cheerleader at times.” One way for therapists to motivate is by setting short term and long term goals for

the patient to work towards. In order for this mode to be effective, a therapist stated, it is crucial to “understand what are their (the patient’s) goals, not my goals, their goals.”

Once these goals are established, the therapist can continue to motivate and empower by positively commenting on the patient’s progression overall or by singling out one exercise that the patient may be doing very well.

The physical therapist’s ability to maintain a calm demeanor in stressful situations was the final theme to emerge. These stressful situations could include a patient being uncooperative, a patient not improving even though they do everything asked of them or even a confrontation with a co-worker. When facing these altercations, one therapist said “I think we need to remain calm, especially around the patients and don’t get too fired up.” If the patients were to see the therapist lose composure, it could cause the patient to lose their confidence in the professionalism of the therapist. Another therapist stated “Life doesn’t always go the way you planned, but just stay calm and do what you’re trained to do.”

When analyzing the data of rural versus metropolitan physical therapists, no outstanding theme of difference in professional traits emerged across the groups. However, in the rural category, four out of the five therapists chose their practice setting because it was where they were originally from or where they wanted to live. Rural therapists are also considered to be more well rounded and have a generalized practice because they have to serve everyone in town. On the other hand, four out of the five metropolitan therapists chose their location because they felt the larger city would allow them to better satisfy their personal goals, such as specializing in a specific area of physical therapy. It seemed that the biggest difference in the two settings was simply the

patient populations, not the physical therapists themselves. One therapist claimed, “I think for the most part, most physical therapists possess the same qualities to certain degrees.” Another therapist summed it up by saying “Someone who is able to read people well, a therapist who’s able to communicate well and adapt their communication according to their patient population can be successful wherever you plant them.”

The findings of this study will be beneficial to current or prospective physical therapists. Prospective and current physical therapists can evaluate themselves to see if they possess these professional traits or if they need to further develop certain qualities to become better clinicians. It can also be beneficial to a healthcare administrator or physical therapy school’s admissions department, so that they know what qualities to look for in potential candidates.

A limitation of this study could be the small sample size, since only five people from each type of setting were interviewed, which could have lead to sampling error. Using a larger sample size could diminish this problem. Another limitation may be that the participants were all from the state of Georgia. In order to solve this issue, physical therapists from all over the United States should be contacted.

In this specific study, no major themes emerged in differences of professional traits between rural and metropolitan areas; this subject still needs further research since rural areas are so underserved. Does the age or gender of the therapist have an impact on their practice setting? What exactly is the difference between rural and metropolitan patients? Do people choose their practice location based more on the environment, money or their personal goals?

The main conclusion from this study is that great communication skills, including the ability to adapt and listen, developing deeper relationships with patients, a breadth of knowledge and the ability to teach it to the patient, a motivating personality and a calm demeanor are all professional traits of an optimal physical therapist.

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Appendix

Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board Proposal Narrative

A Qualitative Examination of Optimal Professional Traits of Physical Therapists. – An Exploratory Investigation

Nicholas Wood

Mentor: Dr. Daniel Czech

Personnel

Nicholas Wood will be the primary investigator who conducts all interviews and analyzes the information. Nicholas is a senior exercise science major and a member of the University Honors Program. Dr. Daniel Czech, who has assisted in undergraduate and graduate research over the years, is the mentor and will provide guidance throughout the research process. He will also assist in the analyzing process.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to use a qualitative approach to decipher what physical therapists consider to be the optimal qualities necessary for a successful practice. This study aims to determine if therapists practicing in a rural community must possess different qualities than therapists practicing in a metropolitan area in order to help people better prepare for their future job in a smaller town. This research aims to answer the question of what are the essential professional traits of a successful physical therapist. It will also answer if there are any differences between rural and metropolitan physical therapists. I believe that there will be a few slight differences between the two categories but they will express mostly similar opinions. The participants will not experience any

direct benefits. However, the therapists may realize that they need to further develop certain skills in order to be more successful. Future employers will also gain information on what qualities to look for in therapists based on the location of the practice.

Literature Review

Many studies have been conducted to identify optimal qualities of physical therapists that are crucial for a successful practice. One of the most prominent reoccurring themes involves the relationship between the therapist and patient. Leopold states that the relationship is even more important than the actual treatment because the therapist's feelings, attitudes and behaviors greatly influence the patient (Leopold, 1954). Therefore, the therapist must be optimistic and positive around patients, always smiling and striving to keep the patient cheerful (Jacobson, 1980). Having a good sense of humor also creates a pleasant atmosphere that motivates the patient (Edwards et al., 2004). The therapist must be able to motivate and empower the patient, encouraging them to work to their fullest capacity but always reminding them of their limitations (Resnik & Jensen, 2003).

In rural areas, healthcare professionals are more connected to the community. Therapists are considered a crucial access point, causing them to have close relationships with their patients, which could lead to more effective therapy (King et al., 2010). However, there is an ongoing problem in rural health involving the attraction and retention of medical professionals. This could be in part due to the lack of a broad support structure, lower opportunities for personal development and fewer incentives (Roots, 2013). The lack of sources for furthering education may also keep therapists

away from rural areas, since most of them long to increase their knowledge (King et al., 2010). There is a lot of ongoing research to discover effective methods of drawing medical professionals to rural areas. The research will involve a semi-guided interview, which has been used in these previous studies mentioned above.

Outcome

This study expects to achieve a concise list of optimal qualities for physical therapists. It will also decipher any differences between therapists in the city and those in rural areas. The study's results will benefit both potential and current physical therapists because they will know what qualities they must possess or develop. Results from the study will also benefit employers because they will know what qualities to look for in applicants and know how to recruit by location.

Subjects

There will be five therapists from metropolitan areas and five therapists from rural areas. The therapist can have a Masters or Doctorate of physical therapy and age does not matter. The subjects may be male or female; gender does not matter.

Recruitment

The arrangements for conducting the study will all be done over telephone. Unfortunately, due to the cost of travel and lack of time, the interviews will not be conducted in person. The subjects will be selected from the Internet by searching for

physical therapy practices' websites. They will then be contacted to discover if they are interested and willing to participate in the study.

Procedures

Data will be collected through semi-guided interviews through the use of open-ended questions. The semi-guided interview will allow for flexibility of question wording or sequencing and additional probing in to responses in order to clarify information. The interviews will be recorded to assist in the transcribing process, so that no information is missed.

Analysis

This study will implement a qualitative approach to be used for analyzing the data that was adapted from Czech et al (2004) as outlined below.

- E. Approaching the interviews
 - Transcribing the interview*
 - Obtaining a grasp of the interview*

- F. Focusing the data
 - Bracketing the data*

- G. Reduction
 - *Eliminating the irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping data*
 - Verifying the elimination of the data*

- H. Releasing meaning
 - Forming categories*
 - Identifying themes*
 - Describing themes*

Risk

There are no risks greater than normal risks associated with daily life experiences.

The study will involve no physical interaction, which completely eliminates any risk associated with physical movement.

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- Roots, R. K., Li L. C. (2013). Recruitment and retention of occupational therapists and physiotherapists in rural regions: a meta-synthesis. *BMC Health Services Research*. 13:1-14.

Interview Questions

1. Basic Information:
 - Name
 - Degree
 - Years Practiced
2. Describe the ideal physical therapist.
3. What are the most important qualities to have?
4. Describe how a physical therapist should interact with his/her patients.
5. Describe an ideal physical therapist's communication style.
 - Is it more important to have a business/shallow relationship or a deeper relationship with your patient?
6. Describe how a physical therapist can motivate patients during treatment.
7. How important do you view the teaching aspect in your practice?
8. Describe how a physical therapist should react in a stressful situation.
9. What are the strongest/most crucial factors that successfully affect your clinical practice?
10. Why did you choose a metropolitan/rural area? (depending on their location)
11. Do you think there are any differences in therapists in the two different locations?

Other questions may have been used in order to draw more information from the participant or to better explain the question.