

Original Article

Assessment of Professionalism, Attitudes, and Behaviors in Practicing Physical Therapy

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ABSTRACT

Background: The field of physiotherapy plays a crucial role within the healthcare landscape, particularly in the context of modern medical and surgical practices. Professional behavior, attitudes, and values are fundamental to the practice, influencing patient care and interprofessional collaboration. Recent studies have highlighted a need for continuous evaluation and improvement in these areas to enhance the overall quality of physiotherapy services.

Objective: This study aimed to assess the current state of professionalism, attitudes, and behaviors among practicing physical therapists, identifying strengths and areas for development to inform future educational and professional development initiatives.

Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted among 120 physical therapists in Lahore, utilizing convenient sampling. The Professional Behavior Continuum, a self-reflective tool, was employed to evaluate professional behaviors in various clinical settings. Data were collected through questionnaires, including a consent form to ensure confidentiality. The analysis was performed using SPSS version 25, focusing on descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage to quantify the extent of core professional values among participants.

Results: The majority of participants were aged between 26-30 years (45%), predominantly male (70%), and had 1-5 years of work experience (65%). The study revealed positive perceptions of integrity (60% honesty, 65% personal responsibility), respect (65% confidentiality, 70% diversity), responsibility (75% punctual for learning, 60% cope with challenges), competence (80% responsibility for learning, 70% self-reflection), maturity (80% professional dress/language, 70% emotional stability), and communication (80% respectful, 70% empathy/compassion) among physical therapists.

Conclusion: The findings indicate a generally positive outlook on professional behaviors, attitudes, and values among physical therapists, with notable strengths in areas such as responsibility, competence, and communication. However, the study also suggests the need for ongoing professional development and education to address areas of improvement and ensure the highest standards of patient care and professional practice.

Keywords: Physical Therapy, Professionalism, Attitudes, Behaviors, Professional Development, Patient Care, Interprofessional Collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

The debate surrounding ethics and professionalism within the field of physical therapy has garnered significant attention, emphasizing the necessity for professionals to embody the ethics of their field. Professionalism in physical therapy is characterized by a set of attitudes and behaviors that are specific to the profession, underpinned by core values such as respect, ethics, caring, altruism, and excellence (1, 2). These values guide physical therapists in their collaboration with other professions to enhance the well-being of individuals and communities (3). Despite the idealistic view of physical therapy as a profession, it has faced challenges in being recognized as such, highlighting the need for a reassessment of its professional image and the attitudes and behaviors of its practitioners (2, 6, 7).

In response to these challenges, the House of Delegates of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) enacted a significant update to the APTA Code of Ethics for physical therapists and the Standards of Ethical Conduct for the Physical Therapist Assistant in June 2009, with the revisions becoming effective in July 2010 (3). This initiative underscores the commitment to elevating the

professional standards within the field. Research into professionalism in physical therapy has been robust, with studies like those conducted by Lorna M et al. and Crandell CE et al. contributing valuable insights. Lorna M introduced a model for evaluating and enhancing professional skills, while Crandell CE highlighted the benefits of service learning in addressing ethical issues and improving professional education (4, 5). Furthermore, the American Physical Therapy Association has delineated seven categories of professionalism for Doctors of Physical Therapy, aiming to improve the profession's image and standards (5).

Historically, the perception of physical therapy has evolved significantly. In 1996, the American Physical Therapy Association's Mary Kolb criticized the definition of physiotherapy in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles as merely technical, advocating for a reevaluation to better reflect the responsibilities and professional scope of physiotherapists (8). This call for a redefined identity found resonance in Massey's description of physiotherapy as a professional job 35 years later, marking a significant shift in how the field is viewed (9).

The challenge of accurately assessing the professionalism, attitudes, and behaviors of practicing physical therapists is compounded by the lack of reliable assessment tools. Diane U Jette's study involving 183 physical therapists, which utilized self-administered surveys and Likert scales, concluded that professional behaviors and attitudes were prevalent among practicing Doctors of Physical Therapy, indicating a positive trend in professional development (10). This finding is critical, as professionalism is deemed an essential component of clinical practice, with physical therapists bearing the responsibility of maintaining professional demeanor and attitudes towards patients and society (11).

Research efforts have continued to focus on fostering professional behaviors and attitudes among Doctor of Physical Therapy students and practitioners. For instance, Debra Knight's study employing a pre and post-test 5-point scale to evaluate professionalism among 43 students over 9 months, and Praestegaard J et al.'s questionnaire-based study involving 21 physiotherapists, have contributed to understanding the scope of ethical challenges in the field (13, 14). These studies, along with others that observe shifts in students' perceptions through their academic progression, underscore the dynamic nature of professional values and the importance of ethical awareness in clinical practice (15).

Moreover, a study in the United Arab Emirates highlighted the gap between physiotherapists' self-reported understanding of Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) and their actual knowledge, pointing to the need for enhanced education and positive attitudes towards EBP to improve practice standards (7, 16). This aligns with the broader conclusion that heightened awareness of professional values is crucial for aspiring physical therapists to positively influence their future clinical practice and ethical behavior, necessitating further research to explore the connections between professional ethics concepts and the ethical awareness and behavior of practicing therapists (17-19). This body of research collectively underscores the importance of continuous evaluation and enhancement of professionalism within the field of physical therapy, aiming to elevate the quality of care and ethical standards.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This cross-sectional descriptive study aimed to assess the professional behaviors, attitudes, and values among practicing physical therapists in Lahore. A sample size of 120 participants was determined utilizing the online software RaoSoft for sample size calculation, adhering to the principles of convenient sampling to select individuals for this research. The primary instrument for data collection was the Professional Behavior Continuum, a self-reflective tool designed to enable physical therapists to appraise and analyze their professional behaviors during their practice in various public and private hospitals within Lahore that have physiotherapy departments (19, 20).

Prior to data collection, each participant was provided with a consent form, which they signed to assure confidentiality of the information provided. Following the acquisition of consent, a brief introduction to the research was presented to each participant in person, ensuring a clear understanding of the study's objectives and procedures. The questionnaire was then distributed to the participating therapists and collected once completed, over a period of four months (21).

For the analysis of the collected data, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was utilized. Descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage, were employed to delineate the extent to which core values such as professionalism, attitude, and behavior were exhibited among the practicing physical therapists in both public and private sectors. This methodological approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the prevailing professional ethos within the physiotherapy community in Lahore.

Ethical considerations were meticulously observed throughout the study. The research protocol was approved by the University of Health Sciences Lahore, as part of a thesis project for the transitional Doctor of Physical Therapy (t-DPT) program (Ref: UHS/tDPT/657, Dated: January 18, 2021). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring the protection of personal privacy and adherence to ethical standards in research. The study's design and execution conformed to the Helsinki Declaration,

guaranteeing the ethical treatment of all participants involved. This commitment to ethical rigor and respect for participant autonomy underscores the integrity of the research process and the validity of its findings.

RESULTS

The demographic composition of the participants in this study revealed a predominance of younger professionals, with the majority (45%) falling within the 26-30 age bracket, followed by 30% in the 31-35 age range, 15% between 36-40 years, and a smaller representation of those aged 41-45 and 46-50, each constituting 5% of the sample (Table 1). Gender distribution among the participants was significantly skewed towards males, who comprised 70% of the sample, in contrast to 30% female participants. This gender disparity underscores the need for further investigation into the factors influencing career choice and progression in the field of physiotherapy. Work experience further delineated the sample, with the majority (65%) reporting 1-5 years of experience, indicating a relatively novice workforce. Those with 6-10 years of experience made up 25%, while the groups with 11-15 and 16-20 years of experience each represented a minimal 5% of the total sample, suggesting a lesser representation of more seasoned practitioners within the study (Table 1).

In assessing the role of physiotherapy through the Professional Behavior Continuum, the study highlighted several key areas of professional behavior, including integrity, respect, responsibility, competence, maturity, and communication. Integrity was affirmed by 60% of participants acknowledging honesty in their practice, while 65% recognized personal responsibility, and 55% engaged in self-reflection, indicating a strong ethical foundation among the majority of respondents (Table 2). Respect towards confidentiality was maintained by 65% of the participants, similar to the rate of those managing conflicts (55%) and respecting diverse opinions/values (60%), with a notable 70% affirming their commitment to diversity, reflecting a broad respect for ethical principles in patient care (Table 2).

Responsibility was a prominent theme, with 75% of respondents punctual for learning opportunities, 60% capable of coping with challenges, and a balanced view observed in recognizing limits and acknowledging others' needs, each by 55% of participants. The confrontation of problematic behaviors was also addressed by 55% of the sample, illustrating a proactive stance towards maintaining professional standards (Table 2). Competence in the profession was highly rated, with responsibility for learning noted by 80% of respondents, self-reflection by 70%, and a 60% acknowledgment of equality/inequality issues, along with 50% identifying learning barriers, suggesting a commitment to continuous improvement and equity in care delivery (Table 2).

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Details

Socio-Demographic Detail	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
26-30	54	45
31-35	36	30
36-40	18	15
41-45	6	5
46-50	6	5
Gender		
Male	84	70
Female	36	30
Work Experience (Years)		
1-5	78	65
6-10	30	25
11-15	6	5
16-20	6	5

Table 2: Role of Physiotherapy in Professional Behavior

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Integrity	Honesty	72	60
	Personal Responsibility	78	65
	Self-reflection	66	55
Respect	Confidentiality	78	65

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Conflict	66	55
	Opinions/Values	72	60
	Diversity	84	70
Responsibility	Punctual for Learning	90	75
	Cope with Challenge	72	60
	Recognize Limits	60	50
	Recognize Others' Needs	66	55
	Confront Problematic Behaviors	66	55
Competence	Responsibility for Learning	96	80
	Self-reflection	84	70
	Equality/Inequality	72	60
	Identify Learning Barriers	60	50
Maturity	Emotional Stability	84	70
	Confidence	72	60
	Professional Dress/Language	96	80
	Criticism	84	70
	Behavior	78	65
Communication	Effective Communication	78	65
	Respectful	96	80
	Empathy/Compassion	84	70
	Active Listening Skills	78	65

Maturity, manifested through emotional stability and confidence, was reported by 70% and 60% of participants, respectively, while adherence to professional dress and language was notably high at 80%, and the capacity to handle criticism constructively was demonstrated by 70%. These findings underscore the importance of personal development and adaptability in the profession (Table 2). Communication skills, essential for effective patient care, were well-represented, with 65% effective communication, 80% respectful interactions, 70% showing empathy/compassion, and 65% possessing active listening skills, highlighting the critical role of communication in therapeutic relationships (Table 2).

These results provide a comprehensive overview of the professional behaviors, attitudes, and values among practicing physical therapists, revealing strengths in areas such as responsibility, competence, maturity, and communication, while also identifying potential areas for further development, particularly in gender diversity and experience level distribution among practitioners.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the present study underscore the pivotal role of physiotherapy within the context of modern medical and surgical practices, highlighting the critical importance of professional behavior and attitude among practitioners. This research has revealed that physiotherapists are deeply committed to their profession, demonstrating a proactive approach towards enhancing their professional behaviors, applying academic knowledge, and leveraging daily learning experiences in their patient care practices. The quantitative analysis further indicates a strong sense of harmony and integrity among physical therapists in their interactions with medical professionals, challenging previous research by Noronha et al., which suggested that professional behaviors were notably lacking, with only 1 in 5 students displaying such traits (17). Conversely, our findings align with those of Wolff-Burke, who, after interviewing 11 physical therapists with 8-9 years of experience as clinical instructors, reported results supportive of an improved professional behavior outlook. Additionally, our study resonates with findings from the United Arab Emirates regarding the understanding and application of Evidence-Based Practice (EBP), emphasizing the necessity for enhanced awareness and a more profound comprehension of EBP to foster professional growth and improve patient care (7).

Despite these positive outcomes, the study acknowledges certain limitations, including the use of a convenience sampling method, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to all physiotherapy practitioners. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported measures introduces the potential for response bias, as participants might portray themselves in a more favorable light. The study's strength lies in its comprehensive assessment of professional behaviors, attitudes, and values among physical therapists, providing valuable insights into the current state of professionalism within the field (4, 7, 13).

In light of the findings and the identified limitations, this research offers several recommendations for future practice and research. It emphasizes the need for ongoing professional development programs that target areas of weakness and build upon the strengths identified in the study. There is also a call for the development of objective assessment tools to measure professional behavior and attitudes accurately, reducing reliance on self-report measures. Additionally, further research should explore the impact of cultural and social factors on professional behavior and attitudes in physiotherapy, considering the diverse backgrounds of both practitioners and patients.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study highlights the positive perceptions of integrity, respect, responsibility, competence, maturity, and communication among practicing physical therapists. It reaffirms the importance of honesty, responsibility, effective learning, and listening in their professional ethics. Acknowledging and respecting cultural and social diversities, embracing criticism constructively, and fostering a positive mental approach are essential for professional growth. By working collaboratively, showing empathy, and upholding ethical values and self-responsibility, physical therapists can achieve the highest standards in their profession and contribute significantly to the well-being of their patients.

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