

# The 'lived body' of a physiotherapist: A qualitative research exploring the construct and meaning of body awareness for a physiotherapist

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## Background

In a therapeutic setting, the body of the physiotherapist plays an important role in constructing the therapeutic identity. Taking into account the holistic approach, this body should be seen as one that is influenced by interaction with the mind and the surrounding world. Dehaan<sup>1</sup> speaks of a body that transcends the physical, because it is being lived and experienced. Instead of the conventional way of seeing it as 'an object', it is now more considered to be 'a subject'. The aim of this study was to deepen the knowledge concerning the body experience of a physiotherapist. The incentive for the study was a curiosity about this phenomenon and a need for understanding.

## Method

A qualitative research method was used for the research. Six physiotherapists, three holistic physiotherapists and three biomechanical physiotherapists, were selected and agreed to participate to the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gauge the bodily Experience of the physiotherapists. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed ad verbatim. The data was analyzed using a modified version of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) divided in four steps.

## Results

The findings consisted of four dimensions, each divide into different themes and respectively subthemes, as seen in figure 1. The first Dimension was 'the construct of body awareness' in which the different aspects regarding the bodily experience of the therapeutic population became clear. The dimension 'Importance of body awareness' explains why having an amount of body awareness is meaningful. The third dimension elaborates on influencing factors on body awareness. The last dimension 'unawareness of body' indicates that a physiotherapist not always pays attention to his body.

### Construct

- └ Proprioceptive awareness
  - └ Presentation of oneself to a patient
  - └ Ergonomics
- └ Awareness of physical approximation of patient
- └ Intersubjectivity through touch
  - └ Bodily contact
  - └ Communication
  - └ Trust
- └ Awareness of one's breathing

### Influencing factors

- └ Practice
- └ Nutrition
- └ Sport
- └ Psychological state
- └ Physical dysfunction

### Importance of body awareness

- └ In relation to the physiotherapist self
  - └ Quiescence of body and mind
  - └ Intersubjectivity through touch
  - └ Proprioceptive awareness of ergonomics in case of physical dysfunctions
  - └ Les influence of negative external factors
- └ In relation to the patient
  - └ Proprioceptive awareness of ergonomics to teach a patient
  - └ Proprioceptive awareness of presentation of oneself to a patient
  - └ Enhance ability to perceive and treat patient
  - └ Intersubjectivity through touch
  - └ Empathize with physical experience of a patient

### Unawareness of body

- └ Focus on patient

Figure 1. The dimensions of 'body awareness of a physiotherapist' with main- and subthemes.

## Conclusion

This study gave rise to the discovery of bodily experiences that were important for a physiotherapist. Also became clear why an amount of awareness of the body proves necessary for both the therapist and the patient. For the future it is advisable to further explore the concept.

## References

- 1) de Haan S. Fenomenologie van de lichaamservaring. In: Denys D, Meynen G, ed. *Handboek Psychiatrie en filosofie*. Nederland: De Tijdstroom; 2011:15,213-227.