

Bodily ways of knowing: How students learn *about* and *through* bodies during physiotherapy education.

Abstract

This chapter explores how students of physiotherapy learn *about* and *through* a myriad of bodies. We propose that there is such a thing as a competent physiotherapeutic body and that there are distinctive ways of acquiring this body. We consider elements of physiotherapy education that, despite being effective in cultivating bodily knowledge, are not necessarily recognized by students as doing so. Our inquiry suggests that elements of physiotherapy education operate in a tacit manner that are not always accompanied by explicit theorization, exploration, clarification, or questioning of either bodily ways of knowing or of the intercorporeality of physiotherapy practice.

Acknowledging that some core elements of the profession's knowledge base operate tacitly is of importance, as this kind of bodily knowledge is among the inescapable elements at work in the intercorporeal practice of physiotherapy. This work aims to make explicit tacit aspects of physiotherapy education, in order to advance a deeper understanding of what it might mean to develop a competent physiotherapeutic body.

Keywords: physiotherapy students; tacit knowing; bodily knowledge; embodiment; body competency; corporeal; intercorporeality; tactile-kinesthetic; bodily-emotional; sensitization; visualization; staying attuned kinesthetically; habits of attention

Introduction: The body in physiotherapy education

As a result of what I've been doing during my three years of physiotherapy training, I have become more aware of my own body and have developed more body control, thus I'm more in tune with my body, in a way. This has been very positive for me. From previously being unaware of different parts of the body, I am now more aware of my whole body, but I am unsure why and how it has come about. Whether it is movement classes or simply anatomy lessons or other elements... Surely many things may come into play, but anyhow – during the past three years – I have developed in a positive way in terms of my body awareness and I have more connection with all of me (Olav, physiotherapy student).

We take Olav's reflections in his 3rd year of physiotherapy education as our point of departure in order to explore the phenomenon that one can acknowledge having achieved bodily capacities without knowing how this development came about. In itself, this phenomenon signifies a challenge to the teaching and learning of physiotherapy, as neither professional physiotherapists nor lecturers may be fully aware of the ways in which bodily knowledge is articulated, enacted or produced through interaction. In physiotherapy – as in many everyday corporal practices – we might find that knowledge acquired *through* the body may not necessarily be exhaustively or satisfactorily articulated through verbal language. Rather, we articulate this way of knowing through what we *do* – it is performed. Thus, the tacit dimensions of knowing in physiotherapy incorporate not only non-verbalized, but in some cases perhaps also non-verbalizable knowledge. This is similar to everyday bodily ways of knowing, which we physically acquire through dwelling in different situations rather than through theorization. Once one grants that the education of physiotherapists is not – and cannot solely be – about learning theory and technical, biomedical and communicative skills, but that it is also about educating students' *bodies*, a concomitant need for theorizations and explorations of this very phenomenon arises.

In setting out to study how students learn to become more embodied, how they learn to acquire a competent body that knows in ways specific to physiotherapy, a central challenge was how to scientifically approach, get at, or grasp, embodied phenomena that may not be able to be fully articulated verbally? 'Observation' offers one approach, however not everything is observable that is felt or experienced by the body. Despite the challenge, we contend nonetheless that it is useful to try to make bodily knowledge explicit, by attempting to express verbally what is observed, felt, and experienced in the body. In this chapter, we explore and describe tacit ways of knowing in physiotherapy, and also attempt to make more explicit that which cannot be exhaustively articulated through words. More specifically, we

have set out to explore and describe how students learn both *about* and *through* bodies – how bodies are being shaped and what bodies *do* – in physiotherapy education. Another aim is to introduce a conceptual framework that we have found enlightening and helpful when seeking to explore dimensions of bodily ways of knowing in physiotherapy. Conceptual frameworks and concepts focused on bodily knowledge are, to our understanding, less frequently used in physiotherapy research.

This chapter answers a call from Nicholls & Gibson (2010, p.506) to produce more studies that theoretically explore ‘the way physiotherapists engage with the body’. There is currently an emerging field within physiotherapy research that seeks to explore the practice of physiotherapy in multiple ways, which include economic, philosophical, political and sociological perspectives (Nicholls 2018). This shift attempts to embrace broader epistemological perspectives and to encourage new ways of exploring, understanding and developing physiotherapeutic approaches and encounters, including attention to embodiment. Krieger (2005) writes of ‘embodiment’ as a concept that highlights that ‘our living bodies tell stories about our lives, whether or not these are ever consciously expressed’ (p.350). For Kreiger (2005) taking embodiment into account may nuance our understandings of how both the physical and psychosocial environments shape health and health care.

Macdonald and Nicholls (2017) argue that health workers often need to function alongside the patient, especially when patients need to adapt to a new way of living, and that this includes taking into account the illness, the lived experiences and the sociocultural context of the patient. They refer to these dimensions as a framework for constituting an embodied view of health and illness. Furthermore, they suggest that many physiotherapists work with an embodied approach towards ‘health and illness despite their training not because of it’ (Macdonald and Nicholls, 2017, p.504). Our focus is particularly on how students acquire competent bodies, understood as bodies capable of initiating, participating

and contributing in interaction with patients, in order to establish therapeutic intercorporealities specific to physiotherapy.

Before we proceed to an account of the theoretical conceptual framework applied in this work, we offer a brief description of a study which constitutes the empirical base for the work presented in this chapter. Empirical material, produced through a set of complementary qualitative methods including interviews, participant observation and analysis of education related texts, serves as a foundation, and is drawn upon for illustrative exemplars within the current chapter. The material consists of interviews with 31 physiotherapy students - 24 of the students engaged in one or more repeat dialogical interviews - for a total of 61 interviews. In addition, participant observations - which included focused conversations - were carried out over an eight week period. These observations/conversations took place in six physiotherapy treatment skill classes, and three movement analysis classes, at the physiotherapy out-patient department at Oslo University College (now Oslo Metropolitan University) where students worked in clinical practice.