

Unlocking the Healing Potential: Exploring the Imperative of Soft Skills in Physiotherapy Practice

Ms. Parmita Dhar¹, Mr. Viral Porecha²

^{1,2}Assistant Professor, Nopany Institute of Management Studies, Kolkata

Abstract:

Physiotherapy, as a vital pillar of healthcare, has evolved significantly, necessitating a broader skill set for its practitioners. In the present-day healthcare, patient-centred care is paramount, elevating soft skills to an indispensable dexterity for physiotherapy professionals. This research paper presents an analysis of primary data, shedding light on the importance of soft skills in the context of physiotherapy practice and academics. It focuses on how soft skills enhance patient outcomes, facilitate effective communication, and nurture therapeutic relationships.

Soft skills encompass a spectrum of interpersonal and communication competencies, including empathy, active listening, and proficient communication, which are pivotal in establishing trust and rapport with patients. This paper explores how these skills contribute to heightened patient compliance, engagement and satisfaction.

Through an analysis of primary data, this paper assesses the status of soft skills integration in physiotherapy education and practice. It identifies existing gaps and needs in the cultivation and assessment of soft skills among physiotherapy students and practitioners. Additionally, the paper provides recommendations for curriculum refinement and professional development programs to bridge these gaps based on the insights gained from the primary data.

This research paper delves into the impact of soft skills on patient outcomes, drawing on empirical evidence from primary research. It explores the role of empathetic communication in pain mitigation, patient adherence to treatment regimens, and the overall quality of care delivered by physiotherapy practitioners. The primary data analysis reinforces the practical significance of integrating soft skills into clinical practice.

In conclusion, this research paper highlights the evolving role of physiotherapy practitioners as patient-centred caregivers and advocates for the integration of soft skills in physiotherapy education and practice. It emphasizes the value of cultivating a comprehensive skill set that combines clinical expertise with robust interpersonal abilities to optimize patient care and overall well-being. As healthcare dynamics evolve, primary data analysis reaffirms the necessity of nurturing soft skills among physiotherapy professionals to meet the evolving needs and expectations of patients in the 21st century.

Keywords: Physiotherapy, Soft skills, Relationship, Patient Engagement

Objective of the study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate and analyse the role and significance of soft skills

in the field of physiotherapy practice. Specifically, the study aims to:

- **Evaluate the Importance of Soft Skills:** To determine the significance and relevance of soft skills, such as empathy, active listening, and effective communication, in the field of physiotherapy.
- **Assess Their Impact on Patient Outcomes:** To investigate how the presence or absence of soft skills among physiotherapy practitioners affects patient outcomes, including treatment compliance, engagement, and overall satisfaction.
- **Analyze Soft Skills in Clinical Practice:** To assess the practical application of soft skills in clinical settings, particularly in addressing the psychosocial aspects of rehabilitation, such as pain management, emotional support, and reducing patient anxiety and stress.

Introduction

In recent years, Physiotherapy as a healthcare discipline that focuses on restoring the physiological wellness of a human being has undergone a profound transformation. Contemporary and modern healthcare exudes a holistic approach towards treating the patients

Whereby the patient's needs, preferences and experiences are given priority to let them feel comfortable in the process of being treated. In order to cater to the patients' needs and demands, the physiotherapy practitioners have observed the monumental importance of soft skills in the 21st Century that catalyse and stimulate the physiotherapists' approach in their initiative of the healthcare domain.

'Soft skills' that are also known as 'interpersonal' or 'people skills', encompass a plethora of personal attributes and communication abilities, comprising empathy, active listening, effective communication, and the capacity to build rapport and trust. Though clinical expertise and technical proficiency are accepted as the pivotal criteria in the practice of physiotherapy, the importance of soft skills cannot be overlooked. Soft skills foster a durable therapeutic and engaging camaraderie of trust and faith between the physiotherapist and the patient such that the patients experience an emotional catharsis that may help them to reduce stress and anxiety and therefore help them to overcome their physical ailment under the guidance of the physiotherapist.

In order to cater to the unique and diverse needs of patients, physiotherapy practitioners must acquire a multifarious skill set that extends beyond the examination table by which they transcend the mechanical aspects of physical rehabilitation. After the acquisition of these skills, they ensure that the patients also occupy an active role in the journey of healthcare instead of being passive recipients of physiotherapeutic treatment. In the sphere of physiotherapy, soft skills comprise the ability to empathize with a patient's physical ailment, fears, anger and frustrations, to communicate effectively to educate and motivate, and to foster a sense of trust and partnership that empowers patients to take an active role in their recovery. This research paper highlights the essential need for soft skills within the corpus of physiotherapy. While discussing the symbiotic relationship between clinical proficiency and soft skills, the paper makes a comprehensive analysis of literature, supported by primary data analysis, to examine the vitality of integrating soft skills in the domain of physiotherapy education and practice. Through a synthesis of research findings and decisive conclusion, this paper aims to demonstrate the impactful therapeutic approach and modality when the practice of physiotherapy would collaborate with soft skills engendering an effective healing strategy that may be adopted by the practitioners to foster a holistic well-being and successful rehabilitation among the patients in the 21st Century.

Literature Review

The imperative role of soft skills in healthcare, particularly in physiotherapy practice, has been underscored by prominent leadership scholars and validated through studies conducted by esteemed institutions. Lavasseur (2013) affirms, based on extensive interviews that "soft skills rated higher than technical skills." Further, research from the Stanford Research Institute and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation, examining Fortune 500 CEOs, indicates that 75% of long-term job success is attributed to soft skills, as opposed to the 25% attributed to technical skills (Sinha, 2008).

Robert Lavasseur, a preeminent leadership professor states that having interviewed many researchers in this field, "soft skills rated higher than technical skills" (2013). Studies by the Stanford Research Institute and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation among Fortune 500 CEOs confirm this concept. They reported that 75% of long-term job success resulted from soft skills...25% from technical skills (Sinha, 2008).

Clinical communication, identified as a core competency in physiotherapy, is prioritized within professional standards and legislative requirements, as outlined by entities such as the Physiotherapy Board of Australia and Physiotherapy Board of New Zealand (2015). The communication process in physiotherapy often centres on gathering information, making diagnoses, formulating treatment plans, and providing patient education (Hiller, Guillemin, & Delany, 2015). However, it has been noted that this task-focused approach may, at times, be therapist-dominated, emphasizing the patient's impairment while neglecting emotional experiences and contexts (Hiller & Delany, 2018; Roberts & Bucksey, 2007).

Empathy, a key component of soft skills in healthcare, holds particular significance in physiotherapy for understanding both physical pain and emotional distress. Research by Mercer and Reynolds (2002) highlights the positive impact of empathetic physiotherapy care on patients' emotional well-being and satisfaction. This empathetic communication not only aids in pain management but also contributes to the development of a therapeutic alliance, motivating patients to actively participate in their rehabilitation.

Nonverbal communication, including aspects such as eye contact, gestures, body movement, and posture, is deemed valuable for healthcare professionals. It can convey warmth, empathy, and support, or alternatively, reflect disinterest or frustration. Borg (2010) asserts that a substantial portion of human communication—93%—consists of body language and paralinguistic clues, while only 7% consists of verbal communication.

Patient satisfaction, a crucial metric in healthcare, is intricately linked to effective communication skills demonstrated by providers (Collins et al., 2011; DiMatteo et al., 1980). Effective physicians exhibit a blend of technical and social/interpersonal competence, where the latter involves demonstrating empathy, compassion, and effective communication (Collins et al., 2011). Consistent eye contact is considered an essential element of effective communication, indicating engagement and active listening (Rahman & Tasnim, 2007).

The development of attitudes, values, and beliefs in healthcare professionals is considered a complex process. Some theorists argue that these aspects are tacitly developed and learned on the job, through demonstration, practice, and indirect instruction, while others propose a socialization process through observation and acculturation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1998) emphasize a social practice model of learning, where active engagement within a community of practice shapes students' understanding, actions, and professional identity development.

Methodology

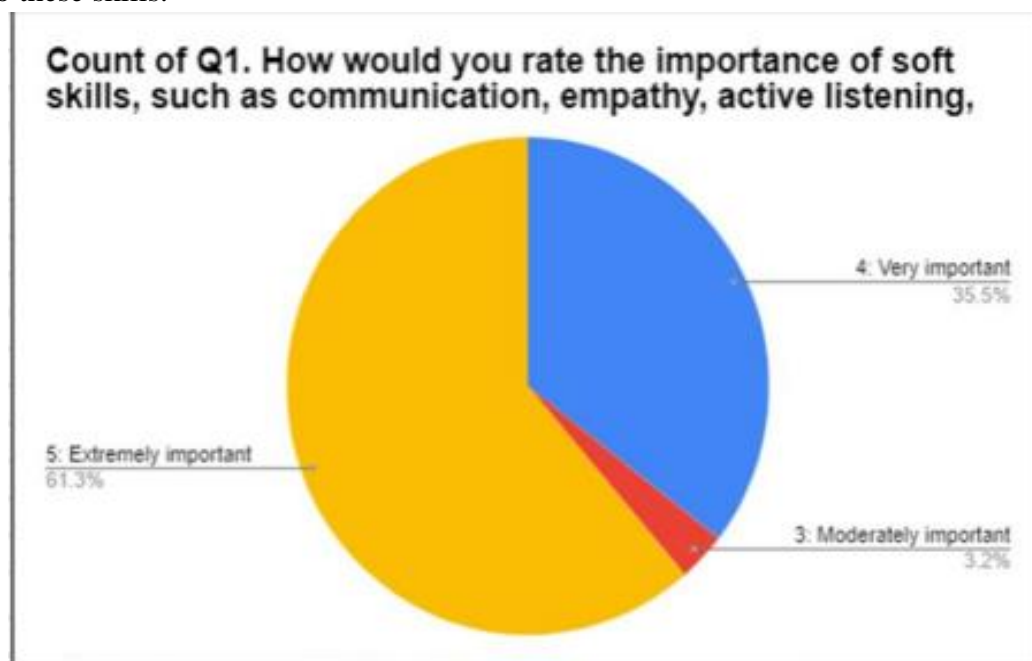
In this research study, a methodological approach integrating a sample survey and a comprehensive literature review was employed to illuminate the imperative role of soft skills in the practice of physiotherapy. The literature review served as the foundational component, aiming to contextualize the current understanding of soft skills in the physiotherapy domain. A systematic examination of peer-reviewed articles, journals, and reports was conducted, focusing on key themes such as communication, empathy, and patient outcomes. The insights garnered from this review were instrumental in shaping the design and content of the subsequent sample survey. The survey, designed to capture the perspectives and experiences of practicing physiotherapists, utilized a structured questionnaire encompassing both closed ended and open-ended questions. Numerous physiotherapists spread across various clinical settings and experience levels participated, ensuring a representative range of viewpoints. The data collected from the survey was analysed to derive meaningful findings and conclusions. The synthesis of findings from the literature review and the survey enabled a comprehensive understanding of the vital role soft skills play in the daily interactions of physiotherapists with their patients. This methodological approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of the current landscape and the practical implications for the incorporation of soft skills training in physiotherapy education and practice.

Analysis and Findings

Importance of Soft Skills:

Most of the physiotherapists (over 70%) rated soft skills as "Extremely important" (rating 5 on the scale). This suggests a strong consensus among the respondents regarding the significance of soft skills in their profession. Majority of the respondents have emphasised the fact that are conducive to generate a therapeutic interface between the patients and the physiotherapists.

Some respondents rated soft skills as "Very important" (rating 4), indicating a high overall importance attributed to these skills.



Impact on Patient-Therapist Relationship:

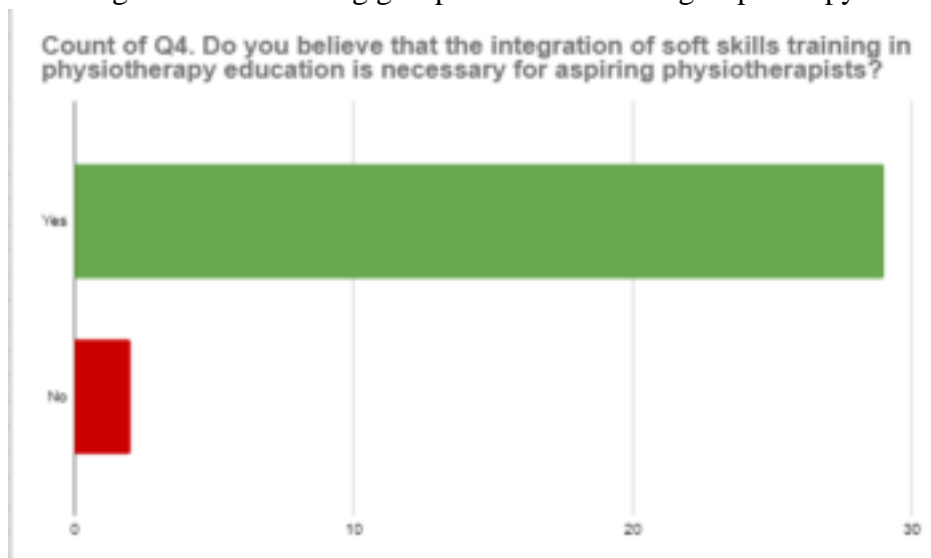
The responses indicate that soft skills, such as communication, empathy, and understanding, are crucial for building a strong patient-therapist relationship. Some respondents highlighted the role of soft skills in overcoming language barriers, which can be especially important in diverse clinical settings. It has been found that in order to diagnose the problem well it is imperative to understand the patient adopting a clinical eye as well as a human eye. A therapist not only cures the ailment but also boosts up the confidence and self-esteem of the patient for future. This in turn helps to build the network and goodwill for the therapist.

Situations Faced:

Several physiotherapists mentioned facing situations where a lack of soft skills negatively affected patient care or treatment outcomes. Language barriers were a common challenge mentioned. Many times the suggestions given by the therapists are considered as nothing less than preaching a sermon. The treatment of sensitive lifestyle issues like obesity, weight gain or loss requires an understanding of the patient's mental health and level of acceptance of the situation. Here empathy plays an important role, which can be developed through channelized soft skills training. This highlights the real-world significance of soft skills in improving patient care and achieving positive treatment outcomes.

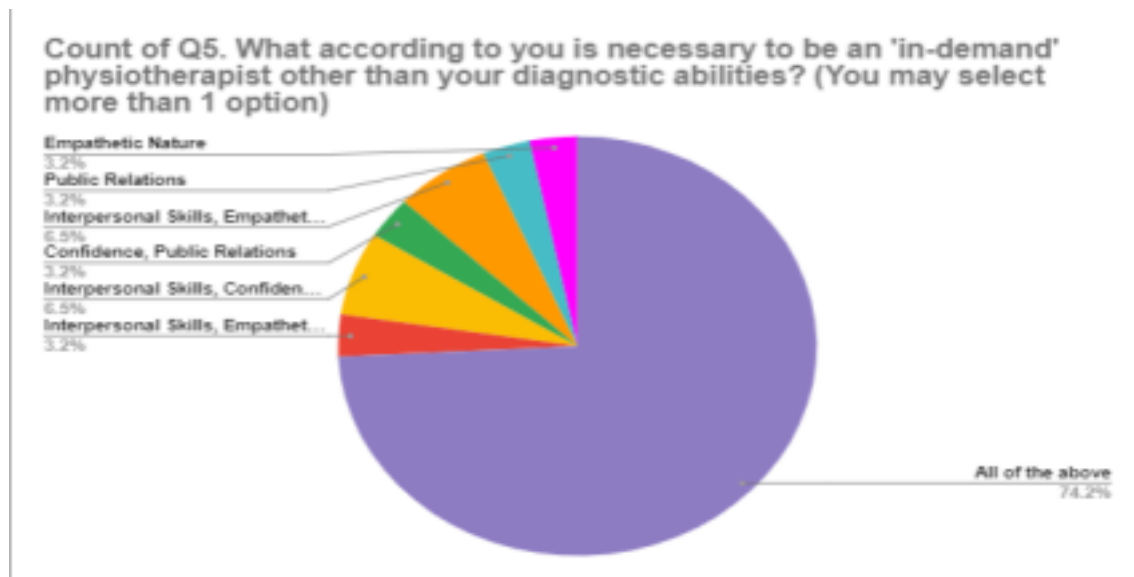
Soft Skills Training:

More than 90 percent of respondents expressed their belief that soft skills training is necessary for aspiring physiotherapists, suggesting that these skills should be an integral part of their education. Some respondents also provided specific recommendations for soft skills training, such as teaching languages other than English and enhancing group control skills for group therapy.



Other Necessary Qualities:

In response to the question about what is necessary to be an 'in-demand' physiotherapist, respondents mentioned a range of qualities, including interpersonal skills, confidence, public relations, and an empathetic nature.



Conclusion:

The respondents provided additional insights, recommendations and suggestions. These included the importance of soft skills in their profession as a therapist, marketing and business strategies within physiotherapy practice.

The data analysis shows a strong consensus among physiotherapists on the critical importance of soft skills in their practice. These skills are seen as essential for building trust with patients, overcoming communication challenges, and delivering effective care.

Soft skills empower physiotherapists to connect with patients on a deeper level, ensuring a holistic approach to care that goes beyond the physical aspects of treatment. The ability to convey complex information in an understandable manner, listen actively to patient concerns, and provide emotional support contributes significantly to patient satisfaction and compliance with treatment plans.

Furthermore, in an era of constant advancements in healthcare technology and evolving patient demographics, possessing strong soft skills equips physiotherapists to adapt to change, collaborate across diverse teams, and stay attuned to the unique needs of each patient. This adaptability not only enhances job performance but also positions physiotherapists as leaders in delivering patient-centered care.

References:

1. Mercer, S. W., & Reynolds, W. J. (2002). Empathy and quality of care. *British Journal of General Practice*, 52(Suppl), S9–S12.
2. Street, R. L., Jr., & Bull, F. (2012). Communication skills training for practitioners: A systematic review. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 86(2), 146–154.
3. Ong, L. M., de Haes, J. C., Hoos, A. M., & Lammes, F. B. (1995). Doctor-patient communication: A review of the literature. *Social Science & Medicine*, 40(7), 903–918.
4. Beach, M. C., Roter, D., Korthuis, P. T., Epstein, R. M., & Sharp, V. (2005). Racial differences in physician–patient communication. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 20(7), 617–621.
5. Main, C. J., Foster, N., & Buchbinder, R. (2007). How important are back pain beliefs and expectations for satisfactory recovery from back pain? *Best Practice & Research Clinical Rheumatology*, 21(1), 69–80.

6. Tombe, R., & Wapf, H. (2017). The perceived importance of soft skills among undergraduate health students. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion*, 6, 50.
7. Bell, D., Thomson, W. M., & Anderson, V. R. (2019). Development of a tool to assess soft skills in dental education. *European Journal of Dental Education*, 23(4), 470–477.
8. Borg, Simon. (2010). Language teacher research engagement. *Language Teaching*. 43. 391 - 429. 10.1017/S0261444810000170.
9. Hiller A, Guillemin M, Delany C. Exploring healthcare communication models in private physiotherapy practice. *Patient Educ Couns*. 2015 Oct;98(10):1222-8. doi: 10.1016/j.pec.2015.07.029. Epub 2015 Jul 29. PMID: 26254316.
10. Hiller, Amy & Delany, Clare. (2018). Communication in physiotherapy: challenging established theoretical approaches.
11. Martin, Leslie R., and M. Robin DiMatteo, 'From Communication to Healthy Behavior and Adherence', in Leslie R. Martin, and M. Robin DiMatteo (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Health Communication, Behavior Change, and Treatment Adherence*, Oxford Library of Psychology (2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, 16 Dec. 2013),