

MASSAGE THERAPY: LIFESTYLE COMBINED WITH PROFESSION

FINAL PAPER

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“The art of massage is said to have been mentioned first in writing around 2000 B.C” (Fritz, 2000, p. 13). This study focuses on and is based on discussions with 3 informants who work as massage therapists and consider their profession not only a job, but a way of life. It describes professional and cultural aspects of massage therapy including the training of a massage therapist and the practice both personally and professionally. Through informal interviews and participant-observation the above informants discussed their jobs, experiences and attitudes towards their profession as massage therapists as well as how they incorporated their job with their personal lifestyles.

Professionally, there are various modalities of massage therapy that people choose to follow and specialize in throughout their careers. The different modalities, of which there are many, can best be simplified to the following categories: wellness massage, medical massage, cosmetic massage, and a combination of modalities to satisfy multiple purposes. The first informant, Lola, is a mother of two and a military spouse. She focuses her skills on reflexology and pedisages, both involving the feet and the correlations to various body parts which are considered types of wellness massages. The second informant, Debbi, works more along the lines of medical massage with her focus on orthopedic massage which covers areas such as the pelvis, back and neck. Debbi is a single female working in Florida who happened to be visiting Lola during this ethnographic study. Satori is a massage therapist working in a popular field referred to as fusion therapy. This involves a combination of healing practices used during the massage session. This is most commonly found in spas where clients are looking for a little more excitement to their visit as opposed to the traditional one hour Swedish or deep tissue massages. She is married with no children and lives on island.

Most massage therapists tend to be female, with a very small number of male therapists nation wide. When discussing this tendency with the above three informants, a common perception is contributed to the prevalence of stereotypes. Many clients of each informant have discussed, at one time or another, their thoughts and opinions on frequenting a male massage therapist. The men tend to have a discomfort level strongly associated with varying degrees of homophobia while the women vary from having trust issues to insecurity concerns revolving around being undressed in front of a strange man. Although all three informants held very high regard for male massage therapists, they all seemed to agree that the client’s comfort level is of

utmost importance and a therapist has to respect their client's preference regardless of whether or not they agree with them.

The training and licensing that is required to be a massage therapist varies from state to state. According to *Massage Magazine* there are “seven state massage laws that require passage of a National Certification Exam for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork in order to earn a license to practice massage therapy” (Walsh, 2006) Other states prefer other exams for their licensing which indicates there is no consistent test method for anyone wanting to legitimately work in the industry. Overall, most states do require some sort of licensing. Education typically involves attending a school that specializes in massage therapy and bodywork. Depending on the state the individual plans to work in, the schools require a set amount of hours of instruction to attend and pass in order to be considered graduated. Often times, a therapist may have to take an additional class or two to meet the requirements of the state they are moving to as each state sets its own standards. Lola experienced this when she moved from Florida to Hawaii and had to take extra classes to meet Hawaii's requirements to practice professionally. Some states even have local requirements and ordinances at the city or county level, so it is essentially up to the massage therapist to know what those are for the particular area they plan to work. In the state of Hawaii, requirements to practice massage therapy include: 570 education hours, a written exam and upon passing the exam, a purchased license for a fee of \$120 that is good for two years. Hawaii does not require a national certification exam (QIMassage.com, 2005).

A basic to training that can be considered standard knowledge involves body mechanics. This is one area that all therapists should have a good understanding about because it covers the various ways for the massage therapist to properly use his or her body to avoid injury. The therapist is performing massage to the greatest quality and capacity using their own body as the primary tool. “This involves good posture, balance, and the use of the strongest and largest muscles to perform the work” (Fritz, 2000, p. 253) Indications and contraindications are another “basic” that should be understood. An *indication* is when a therapist takes an approach that helps improve a client's health, treats a particular condition or can support a treatment for a condition diagnosed by a physician or other health care provider. A *contraindication* is, by contrast, taking an approach that could be harmful to a client's health. Examples of contraindications are persons with a broken limb or an infected area that would not benefit from massage, but rather, could be further aggravated.

There is a code of ethics that massage therapists follow however it is more a matter of general agreement as to what this code should entail. There has been no reached agreement on a specific code across the board to serve the entire profession nation wide. Debbi, the second

informant described a general approach to a code of ethics. This generality includes: being licensed and certified in a massage community, handling proper documentation and paperwork, up keeping sanitation and hygiene standards, therapist-client confidentiality, having liability insurance, maintaining a professional appearance when working with clientele and have a clear understanding of the indications and contraindications of each client they are massaging. Safety standards for both the massage therapist and the client are strongly emphasized and ties in with hygiene and sanitation procedures followed. New linens for each client, clean tables with bleach solution, never referring to the massage table as a bed due to the negative, sexual connotations are all examples of safety standards.

Massage Therapists use a multitude of resources and tools to perform their therapy and also refer to such resources on a day to day personal level as well. Among the most basic and evident are the tables used for the clients to lie on while receiving massages as well as the chairs used as appropriate. The tables on which clients lie have various bells and whistles depending on the modality of the therapist and the financial capability to purchase the desired equipment. Examples of different tables include Lola's dream table she is working towards which includes an inserted foot spa compartment to allow her clients to sit up on the table with their feet in a basin filled with temperature controlled water. Satori discussed her table and the face rest aspect that allows clients to lay on their abdomens while their face rests on a padded section with an opening to allow them to see/breathe and be comfortable. These variations can be true for the oils, lotions and linen used as well. For the most part, the brand of product used is not as important as the essence of the product. Massage Therapists take their oils and lotions very seriously. They associate particular derivatives (sandalwood, tea tree oil, citrus, seaweed, etc.) with specific functions and each should be used sparingly or in larger quantities depending on the ultimate goal best suited for the client. Heating and cooling elements are often used as well as sound and lighting which can play important roles in achieving the ultimate goals intended as discussed between the client and the Massage Therapist. Examples of heating and cooling elements were explained by Lola when discussing her plans to administer stone therapy. She explained how she could use special stones that were rounded and varied in weight on clients by either heating them in a large heating element similar to a slow cooker or use them cold depending on the needs and sensitivities of the client at that time. Lighting and sound contribute to the atmosphere of a therapy session which typically involves low lighting and soothing music or natural sounds like a water fountain or nature sounds played on a cd.

Many cultures have contributed to what is practiced today professionally and personally throughout the massage industry. Some of the stronger cultural influences include, but

are not limited to, Chinese (found through acupuncture, Chakras, and An Ma “push pull”), Egyptian (Foot Massages), and Greek (theories and friction treatments). Some of the symbols commonly found in this field are often traced back to a particular culture or group. The Chinese concept of Ying and Yang, for example, represent opposite yet complimenting ends of a spectrum that can be directly applied to situations involving the time of day as it correlates to various body parts and functions. These differ depending on gender, and therefore, although different, the two genders compliment one another in strengths and weaknesses. Lola’s approach to foot treatments and pedissages can be traced back to the Egyptians. She explains that they initiated the concept of various areas of the feet corresponding to parts of the body including organs and by placing pressure or rubbing the feet in a certain area; a person can actually aide in treating an ailment in the corresponding area of the body.

The general approach to working with clients, talking to them, and the direction of their talk revolves around the therapists’ modality and the perspective of her specialization within her modality. A common approach used when talking with clients involves a sort of diagnosing. Some of our best known basic senses help massage therapists direct communication and guide their approach to take with a client. These senses include: look, ask/listen, touch and smell. Lola’s best example involved her ability to predict approximately where a female was on her menstrual cycle by feeling a particular spot on their inner area between the ankle and heel. She would ask the client if they were due to menstruate soon, and when they said yes in a surprised tone due to her accuracy, she explained that the area in question was inflamed a bit, which gave her such an indication.

Vocabulary used in the day and life of a massage therapist borrows from many different sources. Medical terminology is fairly constant, especially when referring to parts of the body, both interior and exterior. Knowing the medical terms for the various muscles, joints, bones, body parts is vital to keeping in standards with clients’ health goals and needs. Other vocabulary used can be traced to the multitude of cultural influences that helped shape the world of massage therapy today. Debbi found that she had a certain level of comfort working with clients who have had long term relationships with the medical community relating to back, spine and neck injuries. There is a sort of crossover between the two fields of western medicine and massage therapists who focus on the back and neck area. This is often found in the chiropractic offices as is the case for Debbi. She has worked in both chiropractic offices as an assistant as well as doing home visits for massage therapy. She felt it was a positive relationship to be able to cross between the two methods of treatment because it facilitates the ability to have multiple options for a client to choose from when they are experiencing trouble with their backs or necks. There is a definite

difference between those who choose the scientific approach to their health care and lifestyle versus those who prefer a more holistic approach largely found in massage therapy. A scientific approach often involves medications and possibly surgery in some cases whereas a holistic approach relies on minimal introduction of non-natural substances to the body, and surgery is an absolute last resort. All three informants felt they are noticing a larger percentage of people, in their experience, who are opting to pull from both approaches to their health care. “People like to have choices, especially when it comes to their bodies. Holistic approaches, like massage therapy, are looked at as much more mainstreamed and respectable now unlike years ago when it was looked at as a fad that was more mumbo-jumbo than effective” says Satori.

Massage therapists accept their role as more than just a job. In fact, many choose massage therapy as a complimentary profession to their way of life. This difference is carried out not only in medical care, but in psychological and emotional health as well. Such a holistic path can even be followed as far as faith and eating choices depending on the level of involvement and degree of immersion an individual chooses to live. Those who choose to make massage therapy as their profession choose to administer this lifestyle rather than simply live by it.

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