

Exercise Physiology Is a Sacred Profession: Professionalism Issues

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It is not surprising that health professionals invest considerable resources and energy in discussing, defining, teaching, assessing and modeling professionalism [1].

I have learned that many things are called sacred. Many people speak of churches, flags, and burial grounds as sacred. Do they actually believe in the idea of something being sacred? Are they persuaded by the status quo or is it most notably the idea of something “special” is thought as being sacred because the places or objects are valued or rare. Often times the sense of the sacred implies a religious point of view.

Some would say Christianity is at the heart of the American people. For many people, the Christian life is central or the core of trying to understand the Bible, God, Jesus, and faith. Indeed, the Bible is the sacred document of God’s will for all time. Most of us have been taught that Christianity is grounded in divine authority and, thus is a sacred paradigm. It shapes how we view life and death.

Self-regulation is a marker of legitimacy for any occupation striving for recognition as a profession [1].

Is it possible to view “professions” as sacred? Perhaps, more specifically, is it possible to think of the profession of exercise physiology as sacred? Of course the point is this, isn’t it? What is it about exercise physiology that confers a “heightened” status while remaining rooted in scientific research? What is it about regular physical activity or inactivity that bears directly on health and unhealthy states, respectively? When approached in this way, we can begin to see how exercise physiology might qualify for special status.

The logic is simple and to the ASEP leadership’s views regarding the power of exercise are compelling. The idea is that exercise physiologists look for the sacredness of the profession in the relationship that it has between life and death in particular. Exercise physiology is not simply exercise for competition, but rather a prescription for life. Thus, to regard exercise physiology as sacred, it is necessary to think of exercise as medicine. This is the deeper meaning of exercise

physiology. It is a style of thinking that is a kind of power in itself.

It may be those who do the most, dream most.
-- Stephen Leacock
(1869-1944)

Strictly speaking sacred means consecrated by God. Thus, in one sense, devoid of religious beliefs, my colleagues would say that exercise physiology is anything but sacred. Yet, it might

be appropriate to think of exercise physiology akin to the sacred because life is sacred. When exercise is properly prescribed, it is the sacredness of life that is affirmed. That’s part of my reason for writing the book, *Integrating Spirituality and Exercise Physiology* [2]

Think about it. Isn’t the sanctity of life a central essence of who we are (as created by God)? Similarly, if the claim to life is sacred, then, that which is scientifically right to empower life, it seems to me is the moral responsibility of the profession of exercise physiology. Moreover, the emerging ASEP way of being a credible healthcare provider speaks of a “new exercise physiologist” in our time comparable in importance to the early days of development of other healthcare professionals.

However, it is easily argued that exercise physiologists are not the only healthcare professionals who embrace exercise as medicine. This point is logical. Exercise physiologists recognize that the sanctity of life crosses many boundaries. There is nothing about one particular healthcare profession that is more powerful than another – right? Or, is it unless of course given that one profession is more defined by medical prescriptions, another by constant referral to yet another medical profession, or the claim by a third that their way is the only way to a healthier life?

In other words, what distinguishes exercise physiologists and other credible professionals from other healthcare professions is the absence of rhetoric. Thus, it seems to me, by virtue of its importance to life, exercise as prescribed by ASEP board certified exercise physiologists, is recognized as vital to life and therefore a sacred thing! Why, because life is something to be honored and revered. That is why exercise as medicine prescribed by exercise physiologists is sacred. It is an act of caring that is appropriately inspiring.

The only thing that separates successful people from the ones who aren't is the willingness to work very, very hard.
-- Helen Gurley Brown

Some may argue that a personal trainer is equally qualified to prescribe exercise as medicine as the exercise physiologist. However, such thinking is so unfortunate. Personal trainers do not constitute a profession. When it comes to healthcare, the value of life can only be understood in terms of the credibility of the person who gives advice. Life is sacred, and it should be safeguarded. Thus, it must be protected, and one way to do that is to not allow its sacredness to be threatened by unqualified individuals.

Respect for life is all about living. Life is real and urgent. People suffer from many different problems, not just physical issues resulting from inactivity. Thus, it is appropriate to say that the sacred is that which connects us to our clients. Whatever violates that professional connection violates the sacred and yet, whatever empowers the relationship promotes it. As healthcare providers, exercise physiologists are agents of the sacred. Hence, when viewed this way, so

far as I can determine, it is entirely incorrect to think that healthcare professions are not sacred. So, unless there is an argument against such thinking, it should be a dogma that has some truth to it. The sacredness of life is such that healthcare professions should be embraced, especially since there is an intrinsic value that empowers life. To this, I should add that the idea of sacredness is likely to be a question of degrees.

Not only that, a word of warning is in order here. For those who have not learned to think outside the box, it is wrong to think that the obvious is so easily understood or accepted. In other words, there is something to learn from those who disagree with status quo. If a person should say, “the exercise physiology profession is not sacred” – then, the restriction in thinking is simply a product of limited freedom of thought. The point is this: the idea behind the sanctity of human life and the work to achieve a healthier state of mind and body is the “sanctity” of life itself.

Please appreciate that thinking of exercise physiology as a sacred profession didn't occur overnight. Only after decades of working as an exercise physiologist did it hit me! It was then that a breathtaking new view of exercise physiology surfaced. It was so strong that it required the founding of a new organization, and the development of the ASEP perspective regarding a code of ethical behavior, board certification, accreditation, and standards of practice. There is something genuinely important and, without question, necessary that professionalism prevails within exercise physiology. It is logical, expected, and required.

Professionalism instruction is more than faculty role modeling (although important). Today, the explicit teaching of professionalism and the practice of exercise physiology should be a required course.

After all, professional development is central to sustaining the public's trust in the exercise physiology profession. Exercise physiology isn't just similar, but very much a product of the same influences and changes experienced by physical therapy, athletic training, and nursing. Healthcare professionals have for years

understood that their work comes from the heart. They get that professionalism is important. They have a great appreciation for their work being founded upon specialized educational training. Thus, their point is that professionalism is the essence of a new culture and a way of thinking about the education of exercise physiologists.

The ASEP leaders believe that it begins with learning to think right towards exercise physiology. For example, it begins with providing a definition of “what is exercise physiology” and a frame work for understanding “who is an exercise physiologist” and “who isn’t an exercise physiologist.” This is why the ASEP leadership believes that academic exercise physiologists, in particular, are a major player in preparing tomorrow’s exercise physiologists. The need to focus on the

He who aims for
the moon may hit
the top of the tree;
he who aims at the
top of the tree is
unlikely to get off
the ground.
-- proverb

connection between the exercise physiologist and the client is great, and that the here and now is crucial to the right delivery and sacredness of lifestyle changes.

Exercise physiology professors must understand that exercise physiology is under significant threat of internal failure of accountability. The progressive intrusion of sports medicine into the realm of exercise physiology is threatening to replace exercise physiology academic programs with personal trainers.

Academic exercise physiologists must assume greater responsibility for strengthening the future exercise physiologists to commit themselves to developing exercise physiology as a sacred profession.

There is no time like the present to promote professionalism as the core component of the exercise physiologist’s sustainability. Yet, despite the efforts of the ASEP organization since 1997, students and their teachers still speak of the exercise science major or even the kinesiology major as if he or she is an exercise physiologist at graduation. Academic exercise physiologist must begin the change process by correcting the failed rhetoric of sports medicine. It is an injustice to the students who graduate confused and often times mad as hell that they were deceived.

The exercise physiology major by degree title is the bedrock of exercise physiology. It is where all exercise physiologists by virtue of their academic degree and their knowledge of the physiology and anatomy of the human body are recognized as competent professionals. But, it is more than necessary to point out that the ethics of this process clearly begins with updating and enhancing both the formal and the experiential teachings of professionalism and professional ethics, and the purging of the present educational system of its unethical practices.

It's amazing that academic exercise physiologists would think that the past way of thinking about exercise physiology is appropriate for the 21st century. It isn't, and it does not allow for exercise physiology to be viewed as sacred. Moreover, since it is obvious that academic exercise physiologists have lost touch with their fundamental commitment to exercise physiology, being a sacred profession requires a major update in the professors' way of thinking. It is all too clear that their thirst for admiration has interfered with their professional responsibilities to the students who want to be exercise physiologists.

Even if you are on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.
-- Will Rogers (1879-1935)

My point here is simple. The academic exercise physiologists have been for decades too tightly linked to the sports medicine rhetoric. It raises major concerns, especially those of a personal and financial nature versus professionalism. There are also concerns about publishing at the expense of quality teaching. Parents are talking among themselves regarding misinformation their children received about the exercise science major and/or similar majors. The public is increasingly concerned about their high school athletes taking sports supplements. Some are urging exercise physiologists as sports nutritionists to distance themselves from the sports supplement industry.

Yet, from the ASEP perspective (especially, its code of ethical behavior, its professional practice that defines the first-ever regulatory approach to the exercise physiology prescriptive process), the problems exist primarily with the academic exercise physiologists and their consistent failure to embrace ASEP, to get beyond

their arrogance, and to recognize the need to change. Their failure to do so continues to undermine the credibility of the profession.

Professionalism is a required competency in exercise physiology education, as is board certification. Professionalism is at the heart of the client's welfare, and exercise physiologists have the responsibility to teach it to their students. But, everyone knows that professionalism is not one of the academic courses that exercise physiology students take, not even at the doctorate level. As a result, not until professionalism is viewed as important as publishing research papers will society likely acknowledge exercise physiology as a sacred profession.

The moral of this story is, not until altruism, respect, honesty, integrity, and accountability become equal to VO_2 max, anaerobic threshold, running economy, and heart rate variability will exercise physiologists manifest professionalism. The answer is living up to professionalism's core expectation, that is, to subordinate self-interest in deference to "doing the right thing for the right reason."

Although the faculty and students may not see the value in an academic course that teaches professionalism, it is to their benefit that they receive specific instructions nonetheless.

Academic exercise physiologists are key stakeholders in the modernization of exercise physiology. It is pastime to recognize that being hard-wired for self-interest and self-serving bias is a problem. Added to these longstanding threats to professionalism are the common mistakes of department chairs, deans, and vice-presidents. Plus, given that they often are in pursuit of their own agenda, they are not all that interested to promote a competing profession. Such behavior of course is problematic. The need for vigilance and self-discipline is great among academic exercise physiologists.

Students and their parents typically recall having been attracted to what they thought was an exercise physiology major. Indeed, one might say that the faculty members are surrounded by "easy pickings." Yet, they should go out of their way to tell the truth to students and their parents. They don't because they are in charge and "life is good" so to speak. Think about what they have: the privacy of

their offices, the size of the classroom, the authority gap between teacher and student, and the numerous financial benefits of paid travel to meetings and publishing papers.

Added to this thinking, however, is a growing body of information available to backup the alarming impression that exercise science is a meaningless college degree! Most unfortunately, the intrusion of organizations like the American College of Sports Medicine, into academia is hugely problematic. Note that the organization's subtext "exercise science" isn't in the title, but ACSM nonetheless is the driving force behind the meaningless degree program.

The role of ACSM, or should I say, the ethics of ACSM are threatening to and, arguably, irreconcilable with the ethics of professionalism in exercise physiology. Student should be aware that ACSM has already cause harm rather than trust that the students' well being is protected by a financially sound college investment. Thus, whether it is conscious or unconscious, to the extent that sports

Never underestimate your own intelligence and never overestimate the intelligence of others [3].

medicine supporters accept and promote the view that ACSM is the organization of exercise physiologists, the stage is set for the setback and destruction of their identity as healthcare professionals.

The challenge of sacred professions is to keep an eye on misguided thinkers, especially those who are more than willing to encroach on the ethics of their profession. The challenge to academic exercise physiologists, if they are to prevail against the powers of sports medicine, is to assume greater responsibility for professionalism. This means improving the formal instruction of their students, and getting rid of colleagues who engage in unprofessional practices. It means studying what is perseverance, as it is unquestionably the key factor to achieving one's dreams and/or goals. It means learning to deal with criticism and not letting negative people undermine your desire for something better for the profession of exercise physiology.

Increasingly, it is evident that exercise physiologists who are college teachers are responsible for introducing the “business” of exercise physiology to their students and colleagues, for improving client satisfaction, focusing efforts on the practice of exercise physiology, and the importance of scientific and critical thinking in achieving better client outcomes. They are responsible for not letting just any student major in exercise physiology. If students are incapable of dealing with the intellectual hurdles of a rigorous exercise physiology curriculum, they should not be admitted to the program.

While it is essentially non-existent today, academic exercise physiologists must figure out how to teach professional values. They must also learn how to integrate into the exercise physiology laboratory sessions the professional-client components that focus on professionalism. The faculty must adopt a style of teaching and relating to students that promotes the profession. Too long now academic exercise physiologists have been a major part of the problem.

Every time a student witnesses a college teacher giving in to a student’s failure to study sufficiently to pass a test, demean another teacher because he or she is holding a student accountable for studying or for not being respectful, or exhibiting other unprofessional behavior, the student’s dedication to exercise physiology and professionalism is undermined. It is time to uphold the good that inspires the highest standards of professionalism [4]. Exercise physiologists without integrity (meaning, those who disrespect the commitment to a more durable impression of exercise physiology), compromise the sacred status of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession. As so-called educators, they must ask themselves what lessons students take away from their immersion in academia so rife with compromising behaviors.

I do the very best I know
how – the very best I
can, and mean to keep
doing so until the end.
-- Abraham Lincoln
(1809-1865)

Nowhere is the outcome of the failed rhetoric so obvious than with the articles published in the *Professionalization of Exercise Physiologyonline* [5]. The fact is that academic exercise physiologists aren't interested in writing about professionalism is problematic for many reasons. In fact, it appears that they

You may be
disappointed if you fail,
but you are doomed if
you don't try.
-- Beverley Sills

aren't even aware of diversity of successful models for showcasing professionalism in their classrooms, laboratories, within their scientific publications, and during their meetings. Their lack of interest in professionalism doesn't demonstrate an exemplary attitude by any means. Rather, it argues for their commitment to caring and a dedication to themselves only.

Although exercise physiology has what it takes to be a sacred profession, it cannot be solidly recognized as sacred until the academic exercise physiologists start to place a high priority on achieving professionalism. The recommendation for the future is that academic institutions must accept a greater responsibility for teaching professionalism in exercise physiology. Also, it is particularly important that the teaching of professionalism begins with the academic programs in exercise physiology at the doctorate level. There must be required courses and opportunities for formal instruction in professionalism.

Doctorate institutions should hold students accountable for demonstrating professional behavior, especially in areas of expanded research to better define attitudes and specific behaviors of academic exercise physiologists. The ultimate goal is to earmark the profession of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession. This requires putting the idea of "a sacred profession" into action. It means nurturing the professionalism of students and promoting ethical behavior throughout their education at the undergraduate and doctorate levels.

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