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Visualizing Versatility in Clinical Research: A Letter to the Editor on “Clinicians as Researchers”

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I read with great interest the Editors' Note entitled "Clinicians as Researchers" in Volume 2, Issue 3 of the PhJPT. Your insights on the role of physical therapy clinicians in advancing research and evidence-based practice were both enlightening and inspiring. I appreciate the emphasis placed on the unique position of clinicians in identifying research problems stemming from challenges in real-world settings (Lazaro et al., 2023). It resonates well with the idea of bridging the gap between research and clinical practice (Teachman et al., 2012).

Building upon the foundations laid in the article, I would want to explore into the various roles that clinicians can have, mainly expanding on the possible categorizations of clinicians as researchers. The purpose of this response is to highlight the dynamic and nuanced nature of clinicians' contributions to research and the potential overlaps between these distinct roles. Generally, there are four (4) core functions that may be recognized for clinicians in research.

Authors. Clinicians are capable of generating valuable knowledge that would improve the quality of physical therapy practice. Clinicians can add to the expanding body of knowledge in their profession by doing case studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses, as well as by conducting clinical research (Tilson et al., 2016). Furthermore, clinicians who also write play a crucial part in knowledge translation. Their work goes beyond research publications; they also write policy briefs, evidence-based guidelines, and publish journal articles. By doing this, they make sure that a wider audience may benefit from the insights they have gathered. Through these initiatives, clinicians actively align research findings with real-world clinical application, enhancing the overall quality of physical therapy practice.

Educators. By instructing and disseminating knowledge to the upcoming cohort of student researchers, clinicians can cultivate an inquiry-based culture within the field (Jensen et al., 2016). Through transferring their research skills to the upcoming generation of physical therapists, educators can establish the groundwork for the ongoing cycle of inquiry and improvement. Additionally, they can advocate policies and financing for research. Moreover, they can support their peers' professional growth by providing continuing education in areas linked to research, allowing them to stay current on developments in their profession (Docker, Roller, & Eckert, 2013). Their firsthand experiences demonstrate how research impacts patient care, driving policy changes for the profession's benefit.

Participants. Due to their firsthand knowledge of patient care, clinicians can provide useful viewpoints and ideas that might enhance the study process (Lazaro et al., 2023). By actively engaging in research studies, clinical trials, and data collection processes, clinicians become active stakeholders in generating evidence. Impactful research can also be fueled by collaborating with academicians, who are typically researchers (Stern, 2005; Castonguay & Muran, 2015). They can serve as evaluators, ensuring that research projects are rigorous and clinically pertinent. Their insights provide context and depth to research findings as they are important informants during data collecting. Their participation, whether direct or indirect, improves the generalizability and validity of the research.

Readers. By conducting literature reviews (Lazaro et al., 2023) and routinely evaluating research papers to implement evidence-based practices in their clinical settings, clinicians can support evidence-informed practice (Carlow Today & Tomorrow, 2023). Appraising papers on a regular basis equips clinicians with the latest evidence, enabling them to incorporate new findings into their patient care strategies. Engaging in discussions with peers further amplifies the impact of clinicians as readers. These interactions provide a platform for them to exchange ideas, learn from diverse perspectives, and identify prospective research areas. This teamwork streamlines efforts, maximizes efficiency, and addresses common practice issues, fostering greater productivity (Lee & Bozeman, 2005).

However, it would be irresponsible to dilute the roles of these clinicians into unidimensional categories, especially when overlaps between two roles exist and are prevalent.

Innovators. Clinicians who assume the dual roles of authors and participants embody the spirit of innovators. They are at the forefront of advancing the profession by generating novel knowledge through their research endeavors. Their roles as both authors and participants immerses them in the knowledge and practice of research which not only expands their own knowledge base but ensures a seamless integration of evidence into patient care. Their active contribution through the writing and reporting of studies and their direct involvement in engaging with emerging methodologies and interventions pave the way for the evolution of best practices.

Cultivators. Clinicians who juggle the roles of participants (or authors) and educators are aptly described as cultivators. They play a crucial role in bridging the gap between theory and practice by imparting their practical insights and research findings to the next generation of physical therapy professionals. They actively engage in the research process, gaining firsthand experience and understanding of the challenges and advancements within the field and leverage this experience to cultivate a mindset of research-oriented, evidence-based practice among their students, contributing to the development of a research-savvy workforce.

Propagators. Clinicians who undertake the roles of educators and readers are aptly labeled as propagators. They play a pivotal role in disseminating knowledge within the profession by actively engaging in a two-way flow of information. They are responsible for shaping the knowledge base of future practitioners through evidence-based and up-to-date information. They make an effort to better understand research as a subject matter and identifies the most appropriate teaching-learning activities to ensure that the concepts they learned are ably passed to their students, thereby, contributing to a culture of quality continuous learning.

Reviewers. Clinicians who engage in the roles of readers and authors (or participants) play a crucial part in upholding the integrity and credibility of studies and publications through the peer-review process. By providing constructive feedback, reviewers contribute to the enhancement of study design, methodology, and interpretation of results, thereby safeguarding the quality of research within the profession. Additionally, they may contribute reports or opinion pieces, which allow clinicians to share their perspectives on emerging trends, challenges, or innovative practices, enriching the collaborative discourse within the field.

Taking it a step further, overlaps could also exist between three specific roles.

Trailblazers. In the field of physical therapy, clinicians who take on the roles of authors, participants, and educators are real trailblazers. By actively participating in studies, conducting research, and sharing their findings through educational programs, these individuals are at the vanguard of improving evidence-based practices. They contribute to the expansion of the literature by conducting original research, publishing articles, sharing their insights with the broader community, and shaping the next generation of clinicians.

Connoisseurs. Connoisseurs are defined as clinicians who serve as readers, educators, and participants. These people want to develop a deep comprehension of research, obtain firsthand experience and useful insights, and use their knowledge and experiences to inform others about the results of other people's studies. They are essential in ensuring that clinicians not only comprehend research findings but also acquire the critical evaluation abilities and a lifelong curiosity about how evidence-based practice is changing.

Scholars. True academics are clinicians who also play the parts of readers, writers, and instructors. They hope to enhance the field by producing worthwhile research, consuming knowledge through publications and other scholarly endeavors, and sharing their discoveries with a wider audience, guaranteeing that their distinct viewpoints and ideas add to the current conversation. By engaging in original research, they add valuable dimensions to the collective knowledge, fostering a culture of intellectual curiosity and growth.

Specialists. As specialists, clinicians who put on the roles of readers, writers, and participants are committed to upholding the highest standards of clinical practice by keeping it current and grounded in evidence. They stay informed about the latest research, actively generate new evidence, and engage themselves through the rigors of research methodologies. They contribute to the evidence base and ensure that their clinical decisions are informed, current, and aligned with the evolving standards within the profession.

The dynamic roles of PT clinicians can be illustrated using Figure 1 to visualize its multifaceted nature.

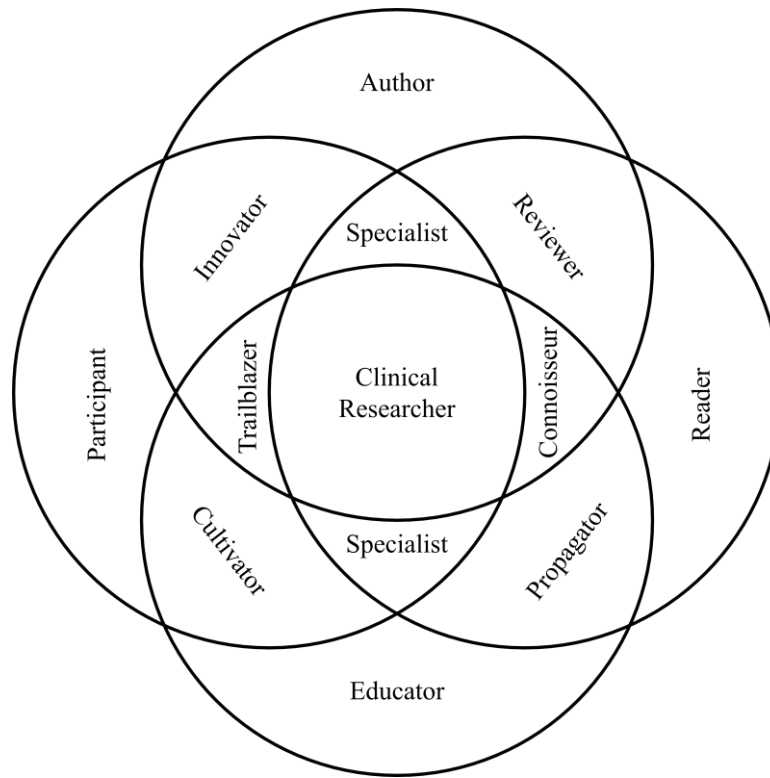


Figure 1. Multifaceted Roles of Physical Therapy Clinicians in Research

However, this is not a rigid rule that should dictate the boundaries that define the roles of clinical researchers, rather, it's better understood as a tool to help visualize and understand the synergy of the many different ways that clinicians contribute to research. Simply put, this framework provides clinicians with a valuable perspective on where and how they can contribute effectively in research. Clinicians play a significant role in influencing the development and advancement of the physical therapy profession as they skillfully negotiate this complex landscape of responsibilities. This note does not just issue a call to action; it extends an invitation to delve into the intricate interplay between theory and practice, knowledge generation and application, and research dissemination and consumption within the realm of physical therapy.

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