

Perceptions of Fitness Professionals regarding Fitness Occupations and Careers: A Phenomenological Analysis

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FITNESS PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR FITNESS OCCUPATIONS AND CAREERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

KEYWORDS: Fitness careers, Professional functions, Professional profile and abilities, Personal factors.

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to examine fitness professionals' perceptions of their profession and careers. Sixteen Portuguese fitness instructors (*M age* = 28 years old) took part in semi-structured interviews regarding their perceptions of their profession. The data was analysed thematically using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The participants were asked to consider topics like their professional functions, profile and abilities; social, group and organizational factors; personal factors relating to their profession and the labour market; and their job's social and financial prospects. From an analysis of the interviews, a comprehensive list of sentences was drawn up, expressing opinions and ideas by the interviewees. These were organized and included in pre-defined categories, leading to a network of sub-themes. This study has highlighted some characteristics specific to the profession that should be considered at a more general level, with significant implications on the professional guidance given to young people, in the organization of workflows, and in the training and organization of the professional activity as a whole.

The occupations of fitness managers and instructors have grown worldwide in response to a growing public demand for fitness services (Viallon, Camy and Collins, 2003). The identification of fitness professionals' occupational perceptions, besides being of help to human resource managers, constitutes a fundamental instrument of support for the evaluation of the validity of training models as it provides clues that can assist in the implementation of new educational and training strategies. An occupational perception refers to the perception of the characteristics of occupations, and by extension, jobs and careers. Such characteristics may include the types of work activities associated with the occupation or the associated competences and traits of workers of said occupation.

Despite the complexity of this activity and its importance, which is so decisive in the dynamics of Fitness and Health, there is little research on these agents, particularly in the context of their professional activity.

Nowadays, as the discussion of educational processes is assuming particular importance, the study of fitness instructors' perceptions of their occupation might provide clues for the reformulation of the occupation's educational requirements and the professional competencies valued in the exercise of their functions and the nature of their work.

An analysis of the job of a fitness professional by human resources managers must consider competency-based and occupational learning processes, work and non-work roles and their relations, biological factors, group and organizational aspects, person-environment fitness, planning, information-processing and decision-making plus outcomes.

Fitness instructors' work includes supervising customers and ensuring that they are exercising safely and effectively, conducting group exercise classes, carrying out inductions and consultations with new members, and designing personal programs. Instructors with advanced qualifications may work with special groups of people, such as the elderly, children with disabilities or clients referred by doctors. In smaller clubs, instructors may also carry out routine duties, such as: attending the reception desk, sales, maintenance, health and safety checks, and pool operations, etc. An instructor's professional intervention demands extensive knowledge and competences because it is multifaceted and performed in diverse contexts. The definition of competency as used throughout this document is the combination of skills, abilities, and knowledge needed to perform a specific task.

With regards to formal education, the high diversity amongst the educational level of instructors, resulting from the multiplicity of professional conceptions, contexts and intervention levels,

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makes it difficult to construct an education model and define professional competences. Simultaneously, the scarce amount of research on this topic makes the referential theoretical anchor impracticable for supporting the education model construction in a consistent and conceptually established way. In fact, various perspectives and positions may be found and several education models have been proposed, although as yet there is no consensus on this matter (Petry, Froberg and Madella, 2006).

With regards to generic competences, a graduate from the area of Health and Fitness should typically be able to demonstrate the ability to use a range of communication methodologies to establish effective rapport with clients, collect information about their personal goals, lifestyle, medical and exercise history, exercise preferences and fitness level by using interviews, a range of physical fitness assessments and other techniques suited to their clients. Other competences in this professional area relate to interpersonal relationships (Maguire, 2001), namely the relationship with the client and the attention given and also the ability to practically deploy established techniques of analysis and enquiry in health, fitness and physical activity promotion.

Training for this work involves obtaining degrees and professional qualifications in order to gain entry to the profession. All professions have a high measure of control over their own affairs and therefore tend to be self-regulating or institutionally autonomous. Fuller and Harding (1994) assessed possible relations between formal education, type of certifying organization, and level of knowledge. They found that no single course had been taken by more than 60% of the respondents in their study and 38% of these health fitness professionals had not completed any of the key courses. Malek, Nalbone, Berger and Coburn (2002), using a questionnaire known as the *Fitness Instructors Knowledge Assessment (FIKA(R))*, examine the relationship between commonly used indicators of knowledge (training and experience) and actual knowledge in the five areas of (a) nutrition, (b) health screening, (c) testing protocols, (d) exercise prescription, and (e) general training knowledge regarding special populations. A survey of 115 health fitness professionals revealed that a bachelor's degree in the field of Exercise Science and possession of American College of Sports Medicine or the National Strength and Conditioning Association certifications were strong predictors of a personal trainer's knowledge, whereas years of experience was not related to knowledge. These findings suggest that personal fitness trainers should have licensing requirements before being allowed to practice their craft, such as a bachelor's degree in Exercise Science and/or certification by an organization whose criteria are extensive and widely accepted.

In this context we recognize three main types of factors that should be known in order to understand how professionals in Fitness and Health live the context of their professions: Characteristics of the Profession; Social, Group and Organizational Factors; and Personal Factors. Activity factors such as the professional competences profile, the characteristics of the profession, the difficulties encountered during the professional career, the perceived future of the professional area will need to be analysed. Environmental variables such as the perceived context in which instructors work, labour market conditions, and the perception of the profession's social value will also need to be evaluated. Finally, individual variables, namely, satisfaction and pleasant and unpleasant aspects of the occupation will need to be considered.

Occupations always reflect the particular social and cultural milieus in which they operate. Rapid leaps in knowledge over the last thirty to forty years have changed the nature of all occupations. Fitness instructors have become more closely connected to the application of expert and scientific knowledge, with a strong sense of the public and social purposes served by professional knowledge and a set of values that limit the nature of their work. Professional careers are embedded into the requirements of social organizations and institutions. Other elements of the occupations reflect broader responsibilities that the professionals have towards society and the profession. Finally, the occupations are dependent on social changes. Therefore, individual careers cannot be analysed by solely regarding the competency profile of the professional, several other contextual, social, personal variables also have to be taken into account. There is a reciprocal dependency among internal developments in individual fields of life (e.g., leisure, family) and an occupation cannot be understood and explained in isolation from the developments in other fields of life. Super's (1990, 1991), life span, life-space theory, suggests that an individual's goals and subsequent professional behaviour is affected by social roles and relationships beyond the work environment. Specifically, the theory argues that the roles of workers and non-workers (e.g., citizen, homemaker) are often interconnected.

The purpose of this study is to obtain knowledge about fitness occupations and careers as a broader phenomenon and a socio-cultural process. Two matters should be highlighted at this stage: firstly, by showing the present-day and socio-professional situation of fitness instructors, those facts that exert a decisive influence on the shaping of a new type of physical occupation are identified; skilled personnel, particularly personnel with higher education qualifications, considerably determine the effects of programmes and plans in this field. Secondly, it is worthwhile showing and explaining the internal, immanent mechanisms governing the development of this occupation from the point of view of the subjective human factor. In this study, we search for the instructors' perceptions of the recognition of their professional competences and professional educational strategies as well as the professional problems experienced. This is useful for improving the processes linked with a fitness instructor's education and career management. Therefore, this is an exploratory study and settles on a heuristic paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of studying the subjective experience of individuals and examines how people understand, create, and interpret their world. In fact, the mere description of their functions and activities, without explaining the perceptions involved which determine professional behaviour, should direct the research to the necessity of studying the thoughts, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and values of professionals (Jones, Armour and Potrac, 1995). Most specifically, the aim of this study is to identify professionals' perceptions of professional competences, as well as to characterize their perceptions of the characteristics of their professional career and to show the reciprocal dependency between individual fields of life (e.g., leisure, family) and their occupation, their professional functions, competences and the context of their professional activities. In sum, what their perceptions are of the social, organizational and personal factors affecting their occupation.

Method

Participants

In accordance with Smith and Osborn (2003) we chose a sample of 16 instructors (male), of similar ages ($M = 28$ years old; $SD = 6.3$ years old), and similar academic level and professional experience. They were in the stabilization stage according to Super's life-span theory. We selected instructors who had a university degree and had worked in urban health clubs as their main occupation. All instructors worked in urban health and fitness centres.

Procedure

Verbal and written contact was made with the participants to explain the study. They gave their consent to participate.

Data Collection

In order to establish a contextualized perspective of fitness instructors' subjective perceptions and experiences when managing their careers, we used an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith, 1995; Smith and Osborn, 2003). Our interpretive approach involved a methodological preference for interpersonal interaction as a means of collecting data (Sparkes, 1992).

Interview protocol. All participants were involved in a confidential 45-60 minute interview conducted by the researchers. We were concerned about the difficulties the researcher faced in establishing rapport with each instructor because rapport and trust are important issues in qualitative interviewing (Smith, 1995). The participants were told that they were going to be asked about their perceptions of their professional occupations. The interviewer and participant then talked about sports professions for a short time.

Semi-structured interviews. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview (Smith, 1995; Smith and Osborn, 2003). In this type of interview the researcher has a set of questions on an interview schedule and (a) attempts to develop rapport, (b) puts minimal emphasis on the ordering of questions, (c) probes interesting areas that arise, and (d) follows each respondent's interests or concerns. The aim is to enter, as far as possible, the psychological and social world of the respondent.

The interview schedule. As Smith and Osborn (2003) advised, the interview starts with the most general question possible. After an initial conversation (about the participants' careers, involvement in the profession, etc.), we then wanted to ensure that instructors gave their perceptions of their occupations. Each person was then asked a general question associated with the research purpose. As general questions can sometimes produce insufficient responses, we had a collection of probing questions intended to elicit more specific information (Smith and Osborn, 2003). These probes included questions like, "Tell me more / explain more about that". Most importantly for this phenomenological approach, the researcher invited concrete accounts of actual experiences that had occurred. Moreover, these guiding questions provided a basis for the participants to discuss both pleasant and unpleasant aspects of their occupation and the future of their career and occupation. Every attempt was made to follow the participants and understand their story rather than

merely follow a standardized order of questions. This approach is consistent with the phenomenological methodology chosen because the participant is considered the "expert" and it is the meanings he/she associates with his/her experiences that are of interest to the researcher (Smith, 1995; Smith and Osborn, 2003).

Data Analysis

The aim of this analytical approach is to explore the participant's view and to understand and integrate an insider's perspective of the phenomena under study as far as possible. Following verbatim transcription of all interviews, each manuscript was read several times. This procedure was then discussed, reviewed, and rewritten several times in a consensual validation procedure. A common understanding of the data was sought while preserving the right of individual team members to hold different views. To attain consensus, the team members discussed disagreements and feelings, which require team members to have strong interpersonal skills as well as empathy and respect for each other. Each of the team members listened to every interview tape and read the transcripts, enabling everyone to acknowledge any subtle meanings. After attaining integral consensus for the themes we moved onto categories (core ideas) to abstract the interview data within themes. Finally, a cross-analysis was used to make common themes among participants. Once all 16 transcripts had been subjected to content analysis, a list of emergent themes was drawn up. These themes were then connected to each other based on similarities and apparent interrelationships. Once a coherent list of related themes was finalized, extracts representing themes were selected (summaries of which are presented in Table 1) and their frequency (Table 2). The final stage of data analysis involved developing a written account of the themes (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

Validity and Reliability

We adhered to a non-foundational approach to validity (Sparkes, 1998). The non-foundation approach involves developing specific techniques that could be used for this particular study, in order to enhance its "trustworthiness" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Specifically, we used two techniques (bracketing and member checking). Prior to and during the data collection and analysis, the lead researcher produced reflexive notes to help "bracket" his personal experiences and consider the influence of his personal values on the research (Smith and Osborn, 2003). He wrote about times when he taught in a gym, trying to avoid imposing his view of the occupation, or interpreting their words purely in the context of his own experiences. The lead author also engaged in regular discussions with the second author, in the role of "critical friend" (Holt and Sparkes, 2001). The critical friend would help expose biases in the lead author's approach, questioning analytic decisions. Occasions where the second author queried analytic decisions were established through a process of advocacy and discussion whereby both researchers discussed their interpretations (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). Participants received a written copy of their results. The lead researcher then involved them in short conversation about the findings, asking some verification and clarification questions in order to validate the analysis. Without exception, all participants corroborated their responses.

Validity and reliability were assessed by studying different researchers' degree of agreement on the interpretation of comments. For validity purposes we used two postdoctoral sport

psychologists with research experience in content analysis. Researchers completed at least two pilot interviews with people from the target population to aid in refining the interview

protocol. Typically, the team members independently segmented the data into themes and categories and then came together and worked to consensus on several divergent classifications.

Themes	Selected quotes from participants
Characteristics of the profession	
<i>Professional Functions</i>	<i>We must do some planning of our work and the work we want that person to follow, in relation to their objectives We must have a professional code of conduct and peer evaluation Convincing people to acquire this product, s has more to do with sales, of course.</i>
<i>Professional Profile and Competences</i>	<i>In terms of gyms, there is an important subject or, in my opinion..., two, in this case, which are Anatomy-physiology and Exercise Physiology.</i>
Social and Organizational Factors	
<i>Image of the Profession</i>	<i>We now talk about Fitness on television and it has passed on to medicine (...)</i>
<i>Labour Market</i>	<i>One of the things that make it easier is that there is more and more of a body cult, people are more interested in exercise (...)</i>
<i>Continuous Education</i>	<i>Today's fitness is not at all like the one five years ago, the fitness from five years ago is not at all like the one ten years ago, and the one from ten years ago is not at all like the one from fifteen years ago!</i>
<i>Essential Changes in the Professional Setting</i>	<i>...those that work in this area must have a degree (...)</i>
Personal Factors	
<i>Pleasant and Unpleasant aspects</i>	<i>One of the advantages is the great diversity of people, of different statuses and different social groups...</i>
<i>The Future of the Occupation</i>	<i>I think that there is a great future in Exercise and Health (...)</i>
• <i>Professional Life versus Personal Life</i>	<i>The fact that we have to work when others don't, because it's when they can come and train, conditions our social life.</i>
<i>Professional fulfilment</i>	<i>(...) this is definitely my great passion.</i>

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Examples of Raw Data Extracts.

Themes	Number of participants frequency
Professional Functions	
Promotion, design and execution of exercise	16
Prevent or treat diseases	16
Ethical responsibilities	8
Professional Profile and Competences	
Scientific Knowledge	16
Relational Capabilities	12
Management	13
Personal characteristics	14
Social, Group and Organizational Factors	
Prestige of the Occupation	8
Entry Requirements and Professional Control	14
Future of the Occupation	8
Personal Factors	
Sources of Satisfaction	14
Effort and Personal Life	15

Table 2. Summary of Themes and Sub-categories frequencies of answers (N = 16).

Results

Characteristics of the profession

Professional Functions. Professionals were committed to several major functions: the promotion, design and execution of exercise meant to enhance individual fitness levels and wellness and to prevent disease in healthy adults. They saw themselves as graduates in the area of sport and health science, capable of designing, delivering and evaluating exercise programs related to the maintenance of health and physical efficiency for apparently healthy or low-risk individuals.

"We must do some planning of our work and the work we want that person to follow, in relation to their objectives." (Instructor 13)

The main concern of sports professionals was reaching the objectives in the health plan and defining a training plan that guarantees solid benefits in this area. They considered it important to create routines, physical exercise habits and above all promote a liking for physical activity and pleasure in practicing it:

"It is fundamental that we are able to educate and train little by little in activities aimed at health and fitness. I think that the most important thing is to orientate the exercise properly and educate the people well too. The exercise must be well orientated; we must know what we are doing and also take advantage to educate the person well so that they understand that this is fundamental for their life." (Instructor 14)

They valued the collection, analysis and interpretation of information about participants' health and fitness status, exercise and physical activity preference and goals, the design, prescription, supervision and monitoring of safe and effective exercise and physical activity programs for apparently healthy or low-risk individuals. They also valued the provision and maintenance of participants' motivation using a variety of strategies to promote behaviour change and exercise or physical activity adherence. There is also an active assumption of responsibility with an ethical attitude and frame of reference. They recognized and responded to ethical issues that directly pertain to the promotion of health, fitness and physical activity and to exercise interventions:

"We must have a professional code of conduct and peer evaluation" (Instructor 6)

Professional Profile and Competences. Scientific knowledge and relational capacities represent the group of competences, which is considered very important. They identified 13 core courses they considered important in training a fitness professional: (a) anatomy; (b) biochemistry; (c) biomechanics; (d) care and prevention of injuries; (e) physiology; (f) exercise prescription; (g) exercise testing; (h) fitness programming; (i) nutrition; (j) nutrition, exercise, and weight control; (k) physiology (human); (l) sports medicine; and (m) weight training:

"In terms of gyms, there is an important subject or, in my opinion..., two, in this case, which are Anatomy-physiology and Exercise Physiology. They are two subjects that we call vital subjects. If we don't have this foundation, I don't think we are teachers, we are instructors. That is all very important". (Instructor 7)

Nevertheless, the competence they most referred to was relational capacity. Instructors valued the use of a range of motivation and behaviour change strategies to enable individuals to be enthusiastic and motivated about their goals and progress whilst providing the support they need to overcome obstacles and

make long-term changes to their behaviour and to establish effective working relationships:

(...) "I think that a good professional must fundamentally be an individual that creates empathy with the students (...). A professional with no empathy is someone I have never seen anywhere." (Instructor 8)

"Psychology is also very important. You will find many people that come to the gym only for social reasons. They come to talk to you, to talk to one person or another, because the working day was intense, because they are in front of the computer, and they talk to nobody (...)." (Instructor 9)

"(...) It's not only prescribing training" look, do this, this and this" that is not giving training. Here the affective relationship, the personal relationship is very important. (...)" (Instructor 10)

"You should have an outgoing, friendly and approachable personality. You also need drive, enthusiasm and the ability to teach and motivate people. Communication skills are necessary for tasks such as clearly explaining techniques or movements" (Instructor 16).

Physical fitness and a responsible attitude towards health and safety were also referred to as being very important in this type of work. They also thought that they should be able to manage several aspects of a health and fitness centre. The fitness instructor must have the ability to assume responsibility for financial management, marketing, promotion and sales, staff management, communications, quality control, programming the use of a facility, and strategic development. Their competency extends to overseeing client retention, technical services, maintenance, hygiene and security. In the area of Fitness and Health, a very specific competence appears, *managerial competence*:

"Convincing people to acquire this product, has more to do with sales of course" (Instructor 10).

Personality characteristics were also considered to be supporting or potential factors for a higher and successful performance. Dynamism, creativity and motivation were the characteristics most frequently emphasized in the interviews:

"When we work with children, being creative and encouraging creativity and expression... with adults, being dynamic and motivating... with teenagers, like in the case of dancing, having good teachers that foment a taste for the activity... and in reference to the gym equipment, it must be stimulating and correspond to the best that there is on the market, otherwise people don't come" (Instructor 11)

Fitness instructors also referred to the importance of image and experience:

"In Fitness and Health, the image of a teacher is someone with a good physical appearance; he/she is a model to follow. Imagine a person arriving at a gym to train with someone, and that someone weighs 120kg, (...). We must win over our students; the image is the first thing that enters people's eyes, the first three seconds of visual contact with a person are the most important and what stays is that image." (Instructor 12)

We can consider the image to be a result of the product that is to be sold and so it must correspond to the user's/client's expectations.

Social, Group and Organizational Factors

The social image of the occupation refers to the set of beliefs people have about the typical characteristics of people in certain occupations and the work they perform. To a large degree, this image is one shared by all adults in a society and professionals consider the prestige or *reputation* of the occupation to be very

important. The professionals considered that their occupation is not properly valued by society and thought that professional recognition in this area is still weak. Some of the instructors interviewed believed that the reputation of these professionals has improved over the last few years, seemingly resulting from an increase in people's concern about their well-being and a greater search for regular physical practice, which is now seen as more essential:

"In the past you heard doctors recommending swimming and today you already hear doctors talking about water exercise, so we are already in the Fitness area (...). We now talk about Fitness on television and it has passed on to medicine, for the prescription of exercise, instead of only speaking about sport". (Instructor 5)

A theme that was also present was that of the actions necessary to improve professional practices. Unlike many other health professionals, fitness professionals are not required by law to possess a license to practice and some certificates are issued after relatively limited training. They also mentioned the need for a professional association to protect both the public's interests and the interests of *professionals*. The most significant proposal relates to the implementation of adequate sports policies, adequate legislation and a serious and competent inspection:

"This association of a legal nature, which really favors the profession, so that a person can or cannot work in a gymnasium. The need for certification must be upheld. It must be someone with a degree in Fitness and Health. It is not possible for me to continue competing with people that have a weekend course. The legislation that was made must be regulated. There must be pressure groups, which enforce political power so that this can be accomplished. It is necessary to inspect what is termed as obligatory." (Instructor 11)

"In Fitness and Health, there are a lot of people looking for work, because there are many physical education teachers with a degree who don't have a job. As they have professional training but not adequate training to perform functions in a gymnasium or health club, they go to see if they can earn some money. Here, we should adopt something that already exists in Brazil, in other words, those that work in this area must have a degree and the right training." (Instructor 12)

For a long time, the job of sports professional was undertaken by people who did not hold a university degree or who had little specific training:

"There is more competition between graduates and non-graduates. Since we are graduates we have specific training, we want to work and nobody gives us work because normally we don't have experience. The others have experience, but in terms of training, they have very little (...)." (Instructor 5)

Nowadays, since there is a larger excess of graduates, the gymnasiums seem to give preference to graduates, but this is not always the case:

"(...) Since there are people with no degrees that want to work in this area, the owner normally hires those people because they earn less." (Instructor 6)

This problem is directly related to the non-existence of specific legislation that regulates access to the activity, and the problem is causing professionals some concern:

"Regulations, laws that clearly define what can be practiced, accomplished by graduates and non-graduates" (Instructor 7).

Fitness and Health, being a relatively young area, appears to be in a favourable situation since most professionals consider the situation of the labour market "easy" or "expanding":

"One of the things that makes it easier is that there is more and more

of a body cult, people are becoming more interested in exercise, they look for more gymnasiums and health clubs, even more so because we are becoming an old and obese population, which has special conditions leading to illnesses deriving from obesity, diabetes, arterial hypertension. It offers prevention and a step backwards from making the situation worse through physical exercise, so people are giving more and more importance to physical exercise and are looking for that prevention (...)" (Instructor 9).

When asked about the future of the profession, they recognized that there will be an enormous impact on their career development and work activities as scientific and technological knowledge and social and cultural dynamics grow:

"If you asked me how I see the profession in 10 years time, what I think is going to happen and from what I have been observing, it is already obligatory for a gymnasium to have a technical director with a degree, which is also the case of even a monitor. This is a slow process. This is what I see in a few years' time." (Instructor 13)

"I think that there is a great future in Fitness and Health (...). In terms of general training, it is related to exercise. Training according to the Trainers' Committee has to do with exercise for health, where I think the future will also bring good moments as long as there are some changes at a political and legislative level. More importance will have to be given to this area because public health is fundamental; we are becoming fatter, there are more and more strokes in young people and also heart attacks. This is due to the type of nutrition that people have and also the sedentary life we live, so the future perspectives in this case are good." (Instructor 14)

This image of the future was accompanied by a positive view of the necessity and pertinence of continuous training. The search for new knowledge, keeping up to date and a close look at what is really known about the subject shows that it is a common worry for fitness professionals. Health clubs give financial support to their employees for training. Seen from a business perspective, the better the employee's preparation, the better his/her professional performance:

"As I said before, the gym I work for, works as a company. It has advantages and disadvantages, and one of the advantages is that they give us continuous training. Almost every month there are different training sessions, such as manual force, posture, water exercise. New physical education techniques and equipment have led to many changes in the industry. Fashion trends have also changed the demand for services. We are always up to date and with no costs for us professionals. This objective of this policy is to improve the club's quality, investing in the teacher's training and consequently in their image towards the public". (Instructor 5)

Personal Factors

One of the most important constructs in a human resources manager is job satisfaction. We are able to recognize that instructors enjoy their work. The positive aspects of the job mainly involve the relationship among the clients or users, the perception that they have a significant effect on the improvement of people's quality of life and on the possibility of personalizing the proposed activity. The good conditions of the gymnasiums and the quality of the available material resources are another source of satisfaction. The salary and schedules are also appreciated:

"It is helping people, in other words, (...) only in an area where we feel close to the person and to the well-being that is produced through exercise, can my attention be captivated." (Instructor 15)

In health clubs, the relationship with the members is special.

There is no obligation to stay in this or that class, nor at this or that gymnasium. For this reason, captivating students from the very beginning can be a very important factor in keeping them as clients, which is essential to the success of the gymnasium/health club. At this level, the professionals experience greater pressure even though the users are voluntary, which could be considered a facilitating factor for success:

"One of the advantages is the great diversity of people, of different statuses and different social groups and that is a form of enrichment, also for me as a person, and the fact that every day I meet new people and am here dealing with them and they like me (...)." (Instructor 16)

In Fitness and Health, weariness seems to be an issue for teachers and instructors in their professional life, originating from the physical factors inherent in obligatory class practice:

"In group activities, the practice component is ever present; the teacher must also do the physical exercises like the students, which causes a sense of fatigue (...)." (Instructor 1)

Limitations in the personal life of professionals were also referred to:

"We start having less time because of weekend games, practices at night, which diminishes the time available for the family and our own free time." (Instructor 2)

The fact that we have to work when others don't, because it's when they can come and train, conditions our social life." (Instructor 3)

In the area of Exercise and Health, time management depends on the function performed. Each of the functions has certain characteristics that condition the possibility of conciliation with a personal life. Even though the schedules are specific and there is physical tiredness, conciliation with personal life seems difficult:

"The practical component provokes a great weariness and then we don't feel like doing anything, which deprives us of our personal life a lot (...)." (Instructor 10)

Discussion

This paper describes a qualitative approach to analysing the perceptions of fitness instructors with regards to their jobs. This type of approach is not very common in Sports Psychology despite it being highly recommendable because of the contributions it can make to professional practice (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis and Sparkes, 2001; Culver, Gilbert and Trudel, 2003; Muroe-Chandler, 2005).

When looking at the professional activities of instructors and personal trainers it is possible to list the following basic functions: planning, structuring and executing of the exercise and activity programs using adequate techniques and processes, specially laid out for an individual or for a group of clients. The professional must know, analyse and interpret all the information obtained about the users/clients, such as their preferences and levels of physical capacities, among others, so that they can prescribe and supervise exercise programs (Petry et al., 2006). It makes sense that planning and evaluation would be functions of the highest importance so as to correctly prescribe the correct exercises according to the user's objectives (Petry et al., 2006). The results showed that, nowadays, instructors recognized the importance of applying a knowledge and critical understanding of well-established principles, theories and concepts from biomedical and psycho-pedagogical subjects to a range of health and fitness contexts, and that they also valued an understanding of the key

aspects of the study of health, fitness and physical activity promotion. However, few concerns were found in the area of pedagogy, or with regards to social and political contexts.

The participants valued a technical conception of the occupation. They valued applied knowledge and content knowledge in the areas of practical fitness instruction/applied exercise teaching, biology, health psychology and public health, with special attention placed on risk factors and lifestyle. They valued interaction in the leading and management of groups and individuals in professional and vocational settings. "Dynamics" and "creativity" also seemed to be important factors in performance, as did personal responsibility, decision-making and utilization of opportunities for life-long learning.

In the perception of professional profiles, the individuals were consensual in affirming that scientific knowledge and relational capacity are essential competences in professional success. Malek (2002) suggests that instructors should acquire specific academic requirements. All professionals believed that completing a degree is important, but not all considered it sufficient for professional performance. This study showed a valorisation of acquiring scientific knowledge, which goes against the policy that some gymnasiums have of accepting individuals with a great deal of experience but with no academic qualifications. The interviewees highlighted a professional competence that has not been sufficiently considered in the professional profile: *managerial competence*.

With regards to professional satisfaction - a decisive factor for the success of the profession - Koustelios, Kouli and Theodorakis (2003) show us a significantly positive correlation between professional satisfaction and professional security among the Greek instructors they used. The high levels of satisfaction reported should be taken into consideration as it links to the experience of security felt by instructors in their professional activity. Another source of satisfaction is connected to "health education" and it corresponds to one of the most gratifying aspects of activity - "improving people's quality of life". This perception of the social importance of their work is a factor that empowers not only the social image of the profession, but also the future of the occupation, which is viewed very positively.

With regards to the negative aspects, one negative aspect affecting professionalism is the difficult conciliation between a professional and personal life as a consequence of physical weariness linked to greater professional activity and the working schedule. Another negative aspect to have emerged is the competition between graduates and non-graduates and the scarce amount of normative regulation. Although the full-time employment of instructors has increased, many people are still employed on a part-time basis. New entrants often begin instructing on a casual basis, sometimes while studying for formal qualifications in the area of physical fitness and education.

Relating the present findings to previous research was complex because, as Dugdale, Eklund and Gordon (2002) pointed out, researchers must be cautious in applying macro-level categories to describe data because findings are dependent on the situation or context. However, in accordance with our purpose, the findings did provide detailed descriptions of professional perceptions, which may provide a foundation for future research. It should be emphasized that, typically, a sample of 16 would be considered a limitation as it restricts the generalization of findings. In interpretive research the maximum number of

participants is normally 15, with studies typically involving 5-6 participants (Smith and Osborn, 2003). The reason for this reduced number of participants is because the objective is to provide in-depth accounts of individual experiences. Thus, our study may be limited by a relatively large sample size that led us to focus on breadth rather than depth of experiences. Further research is needed for a better understanding of our findings.

The study has highlighted some specificity of the profession that should be considered at a more general level, with significant implications in the professional orientation of young people, in the organization of workflows, and in the training and organization of the professional activity as a whole. Namely, the study has implications in the sense that it offers data to explore occupational characteristics and contexts, providing students with a realistic picture of the labour market, thus facilitating the

decision-making process. Major functions and competences such as employability skills and work attitudes are also pointed out.

These types of studies can contribute to the clarification of the complex relationships between professions, professional functions, competences and professional knowledge in the concrete social contexts in which they develop, thus permitting differentiated insights into these occupations. From an applied perspective, we recognize its utility in the construction of the image of a professional in this area. The appearance and prestige of an occupation is of critical significance to a client's confidence in the professional. As such, it would be beneficial to place emphasis on ethics, professionalism, which would be a prerequisite to designing the sociotechnical infrastructure that supports the professional growth of these professionals.

PERCEÇÃO DE LOS PROFESIONALES DE FITNESS DE ACUERDO A SU TRABAJO EN FITNESS Y SUS CARRERAS: UN ANÁLISIS FENOMENOLÓGICO

PALABRAS CLAVE: Profesión de fitness, Funciones profesionales, Perfil profesional y competencias, Factores personales.

RESUMEN: El propósito de este estudio fue examinar las representaciones de los profesionales del *fitness* acerca de sus profesiones y carreras. Dieciséis instructores portugueses de fitness (*M edad* = 28 años) participaron en entrevistas semiestructuradas en relación a las representaciones sobre sus profesiones. Los datos se analizaron temáticamente utilizando el Análisis Fenomenológico Interpretativo (Smith y Osborn, 2003). Los participantes abordaron temas como, las funciones del perfil profesional, perfil y competencias, factores sociales, factores organizacionales y de grupo y factores personales que afectan a su profesión y al mercado laboral, las perspectivas sociales y económicas sobre su trabajo. El análisis de las entrevistas permitió la elaboración de una lista exhaustiva de frases, expresando opiniones e ideas de los entrevistados, que han sido organizados e integrados en las categorías previamente definidas, originando una red de sub-temas. El estudio ha puesto de manifiesto cierta especificidad de la profesión que debe ser considerado en un nivel más general, con implicaciones importantes en la orientación profesional de los jóvenes, en la organización de los flujos de trabajo y en la formación y organización de la actividad profesional en su conjunto.

PERCEÇÕES DOS PROFISSIONAIS DE FITNESS ACERCA DAS OCUPAÇÕES E CARREIRAS NA ÁREA DO FITNESS: UMA ANÁLISE FENOMENOLÓGICA

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Carreiras de fitness, Funções profissionais, Perfil profissional e competências, Factores pessoais.

O objectivo deste estudo foi examinar as representações dos profissionais de *fitness* acerca das suas profissões e carreiras. Dezanove instrutores de fitness portugueses (*M idade* = 28) participaram em entrevistas semiestructuradas sobre as representações da sua profissão. Os dados analisaram-se utilizando a Análise Fenomenológica Interpretativa (Smith y Osborn, 2003). Os participantes abordaram temas como as funções, tarefas e competências profissionais, os factores sociais, organizacionais e de grupo, bem como factores pessoais, que afetam a sua profissão e o mercado de trabalho e, ainda, as perspectivas sociais e económicas sobre o seu trabalho. A análise das entrevistas permitiu a elaboração de uma lista exhaustiva de ideias, expressando as opiniões dos entrevistados, que foram organizadas e integradas em categorias previamente definidas, originando uma rede de sub-temas. O estudo evidenciou especificidades da profissão que devem ser consideradas a diversos níveis, uma vez que têm implicações importantes na orientação profissional dos jovens, na organização dos fluxos de trabalho e na formação e organização da actividade profissional no seu conjunto.

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