INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE OF WORKPLACE LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT: A STATUS REPORT

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Abstract
Although the fields of Human Resource Development (HRD) and Human Performance Technology (HPT) have a growing body of international practitioners, there has been no study to describe their practices as Workplace Learning and Performance Improvement (WLPI) specialists. This descriptive survey study sought to describe international practitioners in terms of general demographics, job-specific demographics, and in terms of how much of their time is spent on various WLPI activities.Eighty seven (87) practitioners participated in the study. More than 50% of the participants had more than 10 years of experience. A majority of the respondents described their job position as consultant. Results also showed that international practitioners spent 34.3% of their time doing WLPI related tasks in their job roles and they were involved in every major phase of WLPI activities. Implications for the fields and future research suggestions were provided.

Keywords: HPT, HRD, WLPI, workplace learning, performance improvement, international practice

Introduction

Among the four *Human Resources* fields (Human Resources Management, Human Resources Development, Organizational Development, and Human Performance Technology), *Human Resources Development (HRD)* and *Human Performance Technology (HPT)* are the two fields that have stronger links to each other in terms of their underlying theories and functions in organizations. Neither HRD nor HPT has a clear or agreed-upon specific definition due in part to their interdisciplinary nature. As defined by Swanson (2001), "HRD is a process of developing and/or unleashing human expertise through organization development (OD) and personnel training and development (T&D) for the purpose of improving performance" (p. 304). Pershing defines HPT as "the study and ethical practice of improving productivity in organizations by designing and developing effective interventions that are results-oriented, comprehensive, and systemic" (2006, p. 6). These definitions from HRD and HPT point out the goal of improving organizational performance, that is, productivity. In addition, both fields are informed by adult learning, performance improvement, systems, economic, and communications theories (Huglin, 2009; Stolovitch & Keeps, 1999; Swanson & Holton, 2009; Weinberger, 1998).

Given that these two fields have theories and practices in common, why do they exist as separate identities? By studying the evolutions of three fields; HRM, HRD, and OD, Ruona and Gibson (2004) highlight the differences and similarities between these three fields. They argue the realization that people in the organizations are the primary source of success brings the three fields together and makes the distinction between them blurry. In addition, the systems view has also contributed to the convergence of these fields. Although Ruona and Gibson's article does not include HPT in their analysis, Cho and Yoon (2010) add the field of HPTto the convergence discussion by linking the relationship between HPT and the other three HR fields. Ruona and Gibson conclude that convergence should be considered as a synergy between the fields to make a stronger case for the value of these HR fields to

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organizations. They believe that a unifying term will emerge to represent all ofthe fields. Since their article was published, there has been no development of an agreed-on unifying term to unite the fields; however, a new term is emerging for the practice of these fields: Workplace Learning and Performance Improvement (WLPI). The professional organizations that advocate and represent the fields of HRD and HPT, namely the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD), the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD), and the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI), are beginning to usethe WLPI terminology more and more in their publications and in the reports by their practitioners and scholars. For simplicity, we will use the term WLPI heretofore regarding practices in both the HPT and HRD fields.

Both HRD and HPT are applied fields. That is, their theory and knowledge base are heavily influenced by practitioners. As organizations around the world are changing and evolving as a result of a global economy, so are the fields of HRD and HPT. In the last decade, scholars in both fields developed projections about the future challenges and directions of their respective fields. Regarding globalization, Marquardt and Berger (2003) point that HRD professionals can maximize the benefits of globalization and minimize the negative effects by focusing on the following seven areas: "(a) political development, (b) economic development, (c) organizational and workplace learning, (d) education and vocational training, (e) global leadership development, (f) technology and knowledge, and (g) environment sustainability" (p. 285). In a survey study, Ruona, Lynham, and Chermack (2003) also conclude that globalization and technology will be two of the forces affecting the HRD within the next 15-20 years.Similarly, economy, technology, society, and business processes have been identified as the key factors to influence the HPT field in the future (Pershing, Lee, Cheng, 2008).

Although both fields need more scholarly discussions regarding future trends and challenges, there is also a need to validate whether these projections match with reality. In other words, both HPT and HRD need to turn to their practitioners and compare what they do with what was predicted what is advocated. One way to link practice with future predictions is to study the practices as documented or published in the journals of professional organizations such as ISPI, ASTD, and AHRD. In the field of HPT, Jang (2008) conducted such a study by analyzing a 10-year period (1997 – 2006) of *Performance Improvement* and *Performance Improvement Quarterly* journals. He identifiesglobalization as one of the prevalent topics written about in these two journals. He goes on to say that globalization and its effect on the world's economy is challenging the core principles of the field. In HRD, such a study does not exist.

Another way to investigate changes in the fields of HPT and HRD in terms of practice is to survey their practitioners about their practice. The organizations that represent the practice in these fields (ISPI and ASTD) play a big role in documenting changes in practice. Both ASTD and ISPI conduct member surveys on a regular basis; however, these surveys have tended to focus on salary and compensation (Pershing, Cheng, & Foong, 2006; Mohindra, 2011). They do not inquire deeply about what practitioners do. In 2008, ISPI conducted a member survey to identify who WLPI practitioners are, where they work, what they do, as well as how much they earn. In being an international organization, ISPI has members from more than 40 countries, although the membership is dominated by American members (ISPI, 2012). Combined results of the study regarding the demographics were published in PerformanceXpress in 2008 (Pershing, Abaci, Symonette, Brunclik, 2008). Although international practitioners were part of the respondents, their results were not separated or

contrasted with their American counterparts. As stated by Pershing (2006), HPT is still mainly an American enterprise. In order to expand the practice of WLPI internationally and globally, we need to understand how it is practiced internationally and whether international practices and dynamics differ from U.S. practice. The purpose of this study is to report the practice of WLPI as reported by the international members of ISPI as of 2008. Specifically, the following research questions were used to address the study's overall purpose:

RQ1: What are the general demographics of international WLPI practitioners?
RQ2: What are the job-specific demographics of international WLPI practitioners?
RQ3: What percentage of work time do international practitioners spend on WLPI activities?
RQ4: What types of WLPI activities do international practitioners engage in when utilizing instructional and non-instructional interventions?

1. Methods

In the spring of 2008, the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) conducted a census study among its members in order to (a) describe professional demographics of its members (age, education, years of experience, location of work, industry, salary, etc.), and (to) identify how often the behaviors associated with the Human Performance Technology Standards are demonstrated on the job. The study used a 126-item online questionnaire that was sent to all members who were in the ISPI's membership directory. Participants included both American and international members. The current study uses demographics portionsof the survey data from the international respondents.

2. Participants

Participantsfor the study were the international members of theISPI. In February 2008, 488 international members of the ISPI were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the study. A total of 87 members responded to the survey. Thus, the response rate was 18%.

3. Instrument

As noted, an online questionnaire was developed and used for the survey. The original online survey included 126items which asked members of ISPI about their demographic information as well as respondents' behaviors in relation to the standards of practice that were developed and endorsed by the ISPI organization.Respondent information that is reported in this study is displayed in Table 1 below (*the way the information was captured is noted in parenthesis*):

Table 1: ***Information (and its collection method) that are reported in the study***

General Demographics	WLPI Practice
• Age (*open-ended*) • Gender (*singleselection*) • Highest education degree obtained (*single selection*) • Formal training in WLPI (*multiple selection*) • Years of experience in WLPI (*multiple selection*)	• Geographic range of work (*single selection*) • Geographic area of work (*multiple selection*) • Job title (*single selection*) • Industry of WLPI practice (*multiple selection*) • Time-spent on different job activities (*open-ended, percentage*) • Time-spent on instructional WLPI practices (*open-ended, percentage*) • Times-spent on non-instructional WLPI practices (*open-ended, percentage*)

Results

RQ1: What are the general demographics of international WLPI practitioners?

Age and Gender. Out of 87 participants who responded to the survey, 58.6% were male (n=51) and 41.4% were female (n=36). Table 2 displays the age and gender of participants in groups.

Education Level. When asked about their highest educational degree, almost 61% of the participants indicated holding a master's degree, followed by 26.5% who held a bachelor's degree. About 5.7% of the participants reported holding a doctorate degree. All education levels reported by the participants are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: ***General Demographics: Age, Gender, Education***

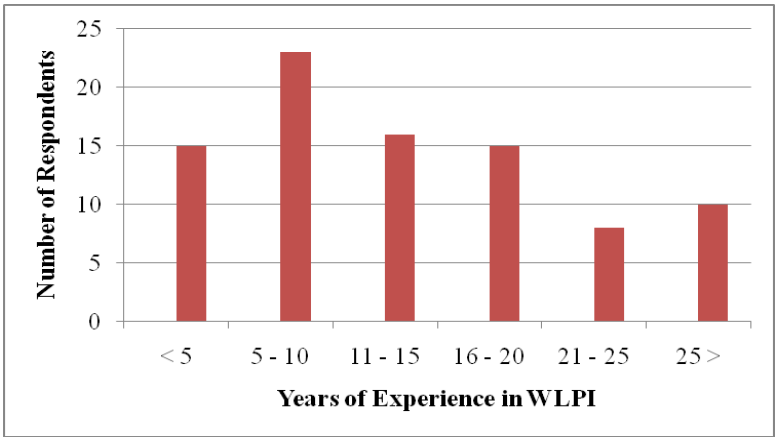
Demographic	Number	Percentage
Age		
▪ Below 30	2	2.4
▪ 31 and 40	17	20.0
▪ 41 and 50	28	32.9
▪ 51 and 60	29	34.1
▪ Above 60	9	10.6
	85	100.0
Gender		
▪ Female	36	41.4
▪ Male	51	58.6
	87	100.0
Highest Level of Educational Degree Earned		
▪ High School Diploma or Equivalent	2	2.3
▪ Two Year Associate or Technical Degree	4	4.6
▪ Bachelor's degree	23	26.5
▪ Master's degree	53	60.9
▪ Doctorate degree	5	5.7
	87	100.0

Formal training in WLPI. Participants were asked to indicate any type of formal training they received toward their practice of WLPI. Different from previous questions, participants could select more than one option. Nearly 71% (n=62) indicated that they attended conferences and workshops sponsored by professional societies. About 45% (n=39) reported that they completed graduate level coursework in one or more aspects of WLPI. Almost 44% (n=36) of the participants earned a certificate from a professional society such as ISPI or ASTD. Another 41% (n=36) attended a workshop sponsored by a consulting firm and about 22% (n=19) earned a certificate from a consulting firm. While 19.5% (n=17) reported completing undergraduate coursework in one or more aspects of WLPI, 5.7% (n=5) reported having no formal training in WLPI.

Years of experience in WLPI. Participants were also asked how long they had been involved in WLPI activities in 5-year increments. A breakdown of respondents for each 5-year period is displayed in Figure 1. According to Figure 1, most of the participants (26.4%) had between 5 and 10 years of experience in WLPI. If the year groups are further collapsed into less than

10 years, and more than 10 years, nearly 56.4% (n=49) had more than 10 years of experience in WLPI.

Figure 1: ***Years of Experience in WLPI***



RQ2: What are the job-specific demographics of international WLPI practitioners?

In order to understand participants' WLPI practice profiles, they were asked questions regarding geographic range and area of work, employment situation (job title), the industry that describes their organization or practice.

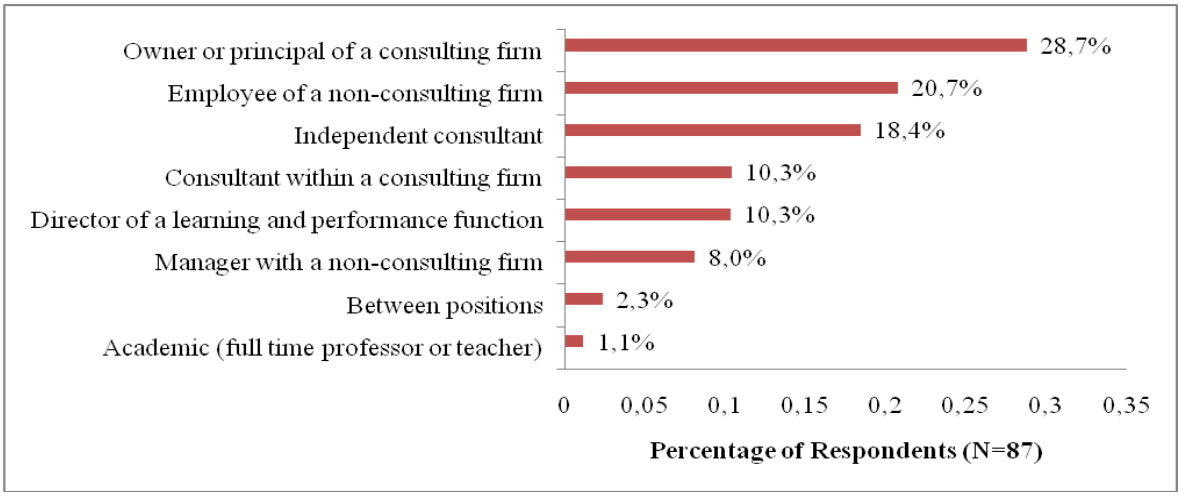
GeographicRange and Area of Work. When asked to identify the geographic range of their WLPI practice, about 32% (n=28) of the participants indicated that their work occurred at the national level. 31% (n=27) of them reported that they worked at the international level. Other participants reported their practice as regional (19.5%) and local (17.2%). As a follow-up to this question, participants were asked to select the geographic area or areas of their practice. They were able to select more than one area. Number of responses for each area by the geographic ranges is displayed in Table 3. Based on Table 3, WLPI was practiced mostly in North America and Europe at the international and national scope. At the regional and local scope, number of reported WLPI practice was greater in North America than all other areas combined.

Table 3: ***Frequency of responses for each area by the geographic ranges***

	Local (n=15)	Regional (n=17)	National (n=28)	International (n=27)
North America	9	11	10	15
South America		2	1	7
Central America				5
Europe		1	8	19
Middle East	1		1	4
East Asia		1	1	8
South Asia				6
Southeast Asia			2	9
Africa	1	1	4	8
Australia	2		4	4
Other	2	4		

Job Title. Based on 87 responses to the question about job title, about 28.7% reported being the owner or the principal consultant of a consulting firm; 20.7% working for a non-consulting firm; 18.4% were independent consultants; 10.3% were consultants within a consulting firm. Another 10.3% reported being director of a learning and performance function. 8% of the participated indicated that they were managers with a non-consulting firm. The remainder of the respondents reported being an academic (%1.1) and between positions (2.3%). Among the respondents, approximately 57.5% identified their employment situation as consultants whereas nearly 39% reported that they practice WLPI in organizations with other job titles (employee, director, or manager).

Figure 2: ***Employment situation of the respondents.***



Industry. Participants were asked to identify the industry or industries that represented their organization or practice and they were able to select more than one. Based on 2012 North American Industry Classification System (NAICS, 2012), the top six industry categories as selected by the participants were government andpublic services (n=37); finance and insurance (n=27); healthcare (n=22); manufacturing (18), education (n=17); and information (n=17).

RQ3: What percentage of work time do international practitioners spend on WLPI activities?

Job Activities. Participants were asked to describe how much time they spent on different activities in their job practices. Based on 86 responses to the question, on average participants spent 34.3% of their time doing WLPI work; 17.2% of their time managing projects; 12.0% of their time teaching others to do WLPI work.The remainder of work time was allocated between business development (10.2%), setting the strategic direction of the unit/department (9.3%), managing the work of others (8.5%), doing other activities that were not listed (8.5%).

Researchers were interested to know whether significant differences existed between participants who reported international range for work (n=27) and those whose work occurred in national, regional, or local range (non-international) (n=59). An independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test was used with 5% level of significance across all response items. We found that average time spent on WLPI work was significantly higher for practitioners with an international range of work than practitioners with national, regional, or a local range of

work. The category labeled "other" was also found to be significantly different between the two groups. A breakdown of average percent of the work time for each response category by the geographic range comparison is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: ***Average time spent on different job activities by geographical range.***

Activity	International (n=27)	Non-international (n=59)
WLPI work	43.37*	30.10
Business development (sales & marketing)	11.70	9.58
Managing the work of others	6.78	9.32
Managing projects	16.22	17.63
Setting the strategic direction of the function	7.22	10.29
Teaching others to do WLPI work	11.85	12.07
Other	2.85*	11.02
Total	*100.00%*	*100.00%*

* significant at $p<0.05$

RQ4: What types of WLPI activities do international practitioners engage when utilizing instructional and non-instructional interventions?

Instructional intervention activities. In WLPI practice, interventions towards individual and organizational performance improvement can be broadly grouped as instructional and non-instructional interventions. In order to identify participants' involvement in different activities necessitated by instructional interventions, participants were asked to specify the fractions of their time that were spent on different types of activities for instructional interventions. On average, participants reported using 17.9% of their time doing instructional needs analysis, 13.2% of their time designing instructional or informational materials, 14.9% of their time developing instructional or informational materials, 10.5% of their time delivering instructional programs, and 11.5% of their time evaluating instructional results. The remaining 32% of the time for instructional intervention activities were allocated between acting as a subject matter expert (14.5%), managing learning systems (4.2%), technical writing and editing (3.6%), designing graphics (.3%), and doing other activities that were not listed (4.3%).

An independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to ascertain whether significant differences occurred between practitioners with international range of work and others with non-international range of work regarding their WLPI practice for instructional interventions. None of the instructional intervention activities were found to be significantly different between the two groups at $\alpha=0.05$.

Non-instructional intervention activities. Participants were also asked to specify the fractions of their time that were spent on different types of activities for a non-instructional intervention to address a performance issue in an organization. On average, responding participants indicated that they used 18.1% of their time identifying performance barriers or requirement; 19.8% of their time designing performance solutions; 8.7% of their time designing work processes and procedures; 11.0% of their time developing performance support methods or materials; another 11.0% of their time delivering change management services; 13.5% of their time implementing programs; and 11.2% of their time evaluating non-instructionalresults. The remaining 5.5% of the time was spent on other activities that were not listed.

An independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test was also conducted to determine whether significant differences occurred between practitioners with international range of work and others with non-international range of work regarding their WLPI practice for non-instructional interventions. Two groups were not statistically different in any of the non-instructional intervention activities at $\alpha=0.05$.

Discussion

As two professional societies representing the practitioners of HRD and HPT fields,the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) and the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) are growing their membership with practitioners from the United States and other countries. Although both ASTD and ISPI survey their members regularly for member profiling and updating compensation statistics, there has been no study focusing on international members and their practice reported in the research literature of these two organizations. This study aimed to report the international practice of workplace learning and performance improvement (WLPI) using the data from ISPI's 2008 census study. The current study focused on the general demographics (age, gender, education, formal training in WLPI, and years of experience) and WLPI practice in terms of geographical range and area of work, job title, industry, and time spent on different aspects of WLPI practice.

Regarding the highest level of education, majority of the participants had graduate level degree (66.6%). Nearly half of the participants also reported that part of their training was graduate level coursework. This may indicate that their graduate education was related to the HPT or HRD fields. In addition, 44% of the participants reported earning a certificate from a professional society. Therefore, we conclude that higher education programs with an HPT or HRD focus and professional societies such as ASTD and ISPI are two major sources for WLPI practitioners as they obtain education and training in their fields. In terms of future research, a content analysis of conference workshops and presentations offered by professional societies and related higher education program curriculums would help to identify the trends in the practice of WLPI. Studying the curriculums across the professional societies would also contribute to the discussion on the convergence of the HR fields.

A majority of the participants (82.8%) had more than five years of experience practicing WLPI. This means that these practitioners were in the field long enough to observe and even experience the changes in their practice caused by the global economic crisis. However, our data were limited in making any conclusions about how the economic crisis influenced their practice in terms of quantity and types of activities. We suggest that future research should investigate effects of the global economy on the practice of WLPI more specifically in order to answer the predictions previously made by scholars (Marquardt & Berger, 2003; Ruona, Lynham, & Chermack, 2003; Pershing, Lee, & Cheng, 2008).

Looking at the geographic range and locations of WLPI practice, WLPI continues to be mainly an American and European business. Most of the practitioners selected North America and Europe as the location of their work. Although there were reported practices in other areas such as Africa, Australia, Asia, and the Middle East, their frequency were relatively low. In terms of implications for the fields of HRD and HPT, professional organizations should give more attention and effort in their outreach activities and partnerships so that global expansion of WLPI can occur more broadly. Furthermore,the national and international range of WLPI practice might be deceiving given the dimensions of the countries and how the borders are politically determined. To illustrate, doing WLPI work for

organizations in Georgia and Texas within the United States (national level) might be equivalent to doing WLPI work for organizations in Germany and Italy (international level). However, practicing WLPI at the international level brings more challenges due to cultural and language differences. Future studies are needed to understand how culture and language play out in the international practice of WLPI.

Our results reveal that WLPI was almost equally practiced by consultants and others who had a different job position or title. More than half of the respondents (57%) identified themselves as consultants. The other half reported practicing WLPI under different job positions including manager or director of a learning and performance function. However, these results should not be interpreted as WLPI being practiced only by consultants or other listed positions. As raised by many scholars in both the HRD and HPT fields, lack of recognition is one of the challenges both fields face due to their relative young age (Bing, Kehrhahn, & Short, 2003; Kahnweiler, 2009; Pershing, Lee, & Cheng, 2008). Therefore, we expect that WLPI is practiced in the organizations under different job titles; more so than one can capture by surveying the members of the aforementioned professional societies.

Contrary to the general perception that WLPI is mainly practiced in non-governmental for-profit organizations, international participants did report practicing WLPI mostly in government and public service organizations. They also reported healthcare, education, finance, and manufacturing as other major industries where WLPI practice found application. All these industries embody relatively large organizations, which was one of the critiques for the HPT field raised by the experts (Pershing, Lee, & Cheng, 2008). More research is needed to understand the relationship between the size of organizations and practice of WLPI.

According to responses to job activities, international practitioners were engaged in WLPI activities more than any other activities such as business development, managing others' work, or setting strategic directions. We believe that managing projects and teaching others to do WLPI work are highly related to doing WLPI work, which corresponds to a total of 63.5% of time an average practitioner spent in WLPI activities in their job. Given that nearly half of the participants were working in job roles different from consulting and they might have had other job responsibilities, this amountmay indicate that WLPI practices were overtly recognized within the organizations of the practitioners.

Finally, both instructional and non-instructional intervention activities were homogenously performed by the responding practitioners. In other words, an average practitioner spent similar amounts of time in analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation when they worked on an instructional intervention. Similarly, when a non-instructional intervention was offered to an organizational performance issues, an average practitioner was involved in different phases of the project equally.

Implications of HRD

Identifying the work of WLPI practitioners as a profession is still an ongoing effort as both fields of HRD and HPT are relatively young and growing. As summarized by Lauer (2008), the definition of a profession varies in the literature; but it minimally involves a defined body of knowledge and preparation for its practice. ISPI and ASTD as the professional associations representing WLPI practitioners have established standards and certification programs (CPT and CPLP) based on studies conducted on competency as an effort to establish themselves as professions. However, these standards and certification programs cannot be set-in-stone in

today's world because the roles and responsibilities of human resources in organizations are in flux as a result of evolving information and the changing demands of a global economy. Therefore, validation studies regarding the professional standards and surveys of member practice are important to update and improve the standards of WLPI practice, and to keep the fields such that practitioners worldwide can relate to them.

This descriptive study identifying WLPI practice of international members of ISPI informs the practice and research in the field of HRD in the following ways:

- It can help the professional organizations (AHRD, ISPI, ASTD) better serve its members by making data-driven decisions on their educational programs for in-service professional development.
- It can inform undergraduate and graduate level programs so that they can align their curriculums based on the needs and practices of current practitioners.
- It can help scholars in the field and leaders of the professional organizations to ascertain the validity of their professional standards and competencies. As a result, it can lead to improvement of the standards by taking the global perspective and practice of WLPI into consideration.

Limitations

This is a descriptive study reporting on demographics and WLPI practice of international members of ISPI. Therefore, readers should be cautioned not to make generalizations about the international or entire population of WLPI practice or practitioners. Although the original survey was a census study, response rate was low (18%). In order make generalizations, a larger sample is needed. In addition, the nature of the data was self-report. Therefore, responses may not match with the true state or practice of the responding practitioners.

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