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EXPERIENCES OF WATSU® PRACTITIONERS AND DIRECTIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

– AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

first step
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Experiences of WATSU® Practitioners and Directions for the Development of Scientific Research – An In-Depth Exploratory Analysis.

Abstract

WATSU® is a specific form of therapeutic work performed in warm water that combines the properties of the aquatic environment, body support, movement, touch, breathwork, and the relationship between the practitioner and the person receiving the session. Practitioners' experiences suggest that this aquatic work may influence multiple areas of human functioning, including relaxation and tension reduction, pain, mobility, body awareness, psychological well-being, and a sense of safety. However, the multidimensional nature of these observations creates a need to organize them and determine which of the reported experiences may constitute subjects for further empirical research.

In this context, the survey was exploratory in nature and represented an attempt to identify the experiences of people practicing WATSU® while also determining areas requiring further scientific investigation. A particular assumption underlying the study was to create a starting point for designing subsequent studies in which practitioners' subjective observations and experiences could be translated into precisely defined, measurable variables and subjected to systematic analysis.

The aim of this paper is to provide an in-depth analysis of the results of a survey conducted among individuals involved in WATSU® practice. In addition to identifying practitioners' experiences and perceived effects of sessions, a specific objective was to determine directions for further research that could give future analyses a more scientific and empirical character. The analysis included 121 complete responses collected between November 16, 2025 and August 6, 2026. The majority of respondents, 82.6%, reported conducting WATSU® sessions regularly. The most frequently identified areas of benefit were relaxation, stress reduction, and calming, followed by physical benefits, connection with the body, emotional experiences, and a sense of safety. Areas identified as requiring further development were dominated by trauma and emotional processes, clinical and rehabilitative applications, technique development, and scientific research and outcome measurement. In practitioners' reports concerning clients, deep relaxation and experiences of safety, care, and trust appeared particularly frequently.

The findings should be interpreted as exploratory and hypothesis-generating material rather than as evidence of the clinical effectiveness of WATSU®. The analysis nevertheless identifies several particularly interesting areas for future research: the effects of WATSU® on stress and relaxation, pain

and functioning, parameters associated with autonomic nervous system regulation, a sense of safety, the therapeutic relationship, and emotional experiences. Of particular importance is the need to distinguish practitioners' observations from interpretations of mechanisms and from effects confirmed by scientific research.

Keywords: WATSU®, WaterShiatsu, aquatic therapy, relaxation, pain, mobility, autonomic regulation, safety, therapeutic relationship, client experience, qualitative research, clinical research, WABA, WABR.

Introduction

Contemporary approaches to therapeutic methods increasingly require the integration of two perspectives. The first derives from the experience of people practicing a given method and includes observations of changes occurring in individuals participating in therapy. The second is based on scientific research methodology, whose task is to determine whether observed changes are actually associated with a given intervention, how large these changes are, how long they persist, and what mechanisms may account for their occurrence. WATSU® currently occupies a field in which practitioners' experience represents a rich source of information; however, further development requires increasing use of methods that allow these experiences to be systematically documented and verified.

WATSU®, or WaterShiatsu, is a practice performed in warm water in which the body of the person receiving the session is largely supported by the practitioner. Characteristic elements include fluid movements, rocking, mobilization, stretching, breathwork, and tactile contact. The specific properties of the aquatic environment reduce gravitational loading and allow movements to be performed that may be more difficult in many situations on land. Water temperature and buoyancy also alter the sensory conditions in which therapeutic contact takes place.

In practice, WATSU® is described much more broadly than merely as a form of work with the musculoskeletal system. Practitioners report experiences of deep relaxation, reduced tension, pain reduction, improved mobility, increased body awareness, improved sleep quality, a sense of safety, and the emergence of strong emotional reactions. Some accounts also describe experiences characterized as transformative, exceptional, or associated with a profound sense of connection with oneself.

Such a broad range of observations is both an asset and a challenge. It is an asset because it provides numerous potential directions for research. It is a challenge because individual experiences belong to different levels of human functioning and require different measurement methods.

For example, if a person reports less pain after a session, this can be assessed using a standardized pain scale. If they report improved mobility, functional measurements can be applied. If they describe deep quieting or calming, questionnaires concerning stress and well-being, together with selected physiological parameters, may be used. If, however, they describe a sense of safety, trust, or an experience of being supported, qualitative methods and psychometric instruments may be required.

This need to translate experience into measurable variables is one of the main reasons for conducting the survey analyzed in this study.

The study therefore had two complementary objectives. The first was to explore how people practicing WATSU® describe the benefits and experiences associated with this form of aquatic work. The second, equally important, was to **identify directions for further research that should have a more scientific, systematic, and empirical character**. The survey therefore served a scoping function. Its purpose was not to provide a definitive determination of whether WATSU® is effective, but rather to establish which questions are worth addressing in subsequent studies.

Such an approach is important for the development of any therapeutic concept or method. Practitioners' experience may identify phenomena that had not previously been considered. Science

can then determine whether these phenomena are reproducible, measurable, and specific to the intervention being studied.

Aim of the Study

The primary aim of the study was to describe the experiences of WATSU® practitioners and identify areas in which this aquatic work is perceived by them as particularly valuable. A second aim was to identify topics that the practitioner community considers to require further development, as well as areas that practitioners themselves would like to explore in greater depth.

Particular attention was also given to practitioners' accounts of clients' experiences. This made it possible to identify which elements of sessions were most frequently remembered by practitioners as important to recipients.

At the same time, the study had a methodological objective: to identify areas that should be subjected to further scientific research. In this sense, the survey results can be regarded as the first stage of a process leading from practical knowledge toward a more formalized research program.

Materials and Methods

The study was survey-based, observational, and exploratory in nature. It was conducted using an online questionnaire prepared in Google Forms. Participation was voluntary, and the survey was open to all individuals meeting the criterion related to WATSU® practice. The questionnaire was distributed openly, without random sampling. Respondents independently decided whether to participate by completing the form.

The survey was available online from November 16, 2025 to August 6, 2026. The research questionnaire was available online throughout this period.

The questionnaire included questions concerning WATSU® practice, practitioners' perceptions of the areas influenced by this aquatic work, the experiences of people receiving sessions, and issues considered important for the further development of WATSU® practice and research. One question concerned the regularity with which respondents conducted WATSU® sessions, while subsequent questions addressed, among other issues, what respondents believed WATSU® helps with most, what experiences and benefits clients most frequently report, what areas practitioners would like to develop, and which topics should be subjected to further research.

Respondents answered the following questions:

1. Do you regularly conduct WATSU® sessions?
2. In your opinion, what does WATSU® help with most?
3. What WATSU®-related topics would you most like to develop or understand better?
4. What are people receiving your WATSU® sessions most grateful for?

A total of 121 complete responses were included in the analysis. All analyzed forms contained responses to the required questions; therefore, no missing data were identified in the analyzed dataset.

The analysis was descriptive and exploratory. For questions in which respondents could select more than one answer or in which responses referred to several thematic areas, thematic analysis and response categorization were applied. Individual responses could be assigned to more than one category. Consequently, the total number of responses and percentages in individual summaries do not necessarily equal 100%.

For open-ended responses, recurring themes and motifs were grouped. The categorization included areas such as relaxation and stress reduction, physical benefits, pain and mobility, body awareness, emotions and psychological well-being, nervous system regulation, sense of safety, therapeutic relationship, sleep and recovery, and experiences described by respondents as exceptional or transformative.

An important methodological consideration is that some questions concerned clients' experiences as described by practitioners, rather than direct responses from people receiving WATSU®. These data should therefore be regarded as indirect reports, potentially subject to selection and interpretation of clients' statements by respondents.

Due to the open nature of recruitment, the absence of random participant selection, the lack of a control group, and the absence of pre- and post-intervention measurements, the study does not allow causal inference or assessment of the clinical effectiveness of WATSU®. Its primary function was to identify experiences within the practitioner community and generate areas and hypotheses that can be examined further in studies using more rigorous methodology.

Characteristics of the Study Group

The survey was addressed to WATSU® Practitioners associated with WABA. A total of 121 respondents from around the world participated in the study.

In the study group, 100 individuals (82.6%) reported conducting WATSU® sessions regularly, while 21 individuals (17.4%) answered negatively.

The vast majority of respondents were actively involved in WATSU® practice. The fact that 82.6% reported conducting sessions regularly increases the value of the material as a source of information concerning practical experience.

Table 1. Declared Regularity of Conducting WATSU® Sessions

Response	Number of respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	100	82.6
No	21	17.4
Total	**121**	**100.0**

Results

1. Most Frequently Reported Benefits of WATSU®

The most important result of the analysis is that WATSU® is not perceived by respondents solely as a relaxation technique.

Relaxation, stress reduction, and calming were identified by 77 respondents, corresponding to 63.6% of the entire group. This was by far the most frequently occurring theme.

The second category consisted of physical benefits, pain reduction, and improved mobility, identified by 46 individuals (38.0%). These were followed by connection with oneself and body awareness—40 responses (33.1%)—and emotions, trauma, and psychological well-being—37 responses (30.6%).

Table 2. Areas of WATSU® Benefits Most Frequently Identified by Practitioners

Benefit area	Number of responses (n)	Percentage of respondents (%)
Relaxation, stress reduction, and calming	77	63.6
Physical benefits, pain reduction, and improved mobility	46	38.0
Connection with oneself and body awareness	40	33.1
Emotions, trauma, and psychological well-being	37	30.6
Nervous system regulation	23	19.0
Safety, care, and therapeutic relationship	23	19.0
Sleep and recovery	9	7.4

Note: The question involved multiple coding; therefore, the percentages sum to more than 100%.

This distribution indicates that practitioners describe the WATSU® experience as a process involving several levels. The first is the physical level, associated with the body, movement, pain, and tension. The second is the psychophysiological level, involving calming, changes in arousal, and recovery. The third is the emotional-relational level, associated with safety, trust, care, and contact with one's own experience.

These three levels should not, however, be regarded as a proven therapeutic model. They primarily represent a synthesis of themes present in respondents' statements.

Relaxation was by far the most frequently identified outcome. In practice, it may be understood as reduced tension, calming, slowing of activity, and an experience of rest.

What is particularly interesting, however, is what appears alongside relaxation. Respondents do not describe it solely as physical muscle relaxation. In many responses, relaxation is associated with letting go of control, increased body awareness, a sense of safety, and an experience of presence.

It may therefore be hypothesized that relaxation in WATSU® can be multidimensional. It may include both a physical component and a subjective psychological experience.

The second important area concerns physical benefits. Respondents reported pain reduction, muscle relaxation, improved mobility, reduced spasticity, and support during rehabilitation.

These observations are particularly important from the perspective of future clinical research because, unlike more abstract experiences, they can be relatively readily translated into measurable parameters.

In the case of pain, standardized intensity scales and instruments assessing its impact on everyday functioning can be used. In the case of mobility, range-of-motion measurements, functional tests, or assessments of the quality of specific activities may be applied.

For individuals with spasticity, more specialized instruments and clearly defined diagnostic criteria would be required.

It would be particularly valuable to conduct studies in which measurements were taken immediately before the session, immediately after it, and after a specified period. This would make it possible to distinguish short-term effects from effects that persist over a longer period.

One of the more important categories was body awareness and connection with oneself, identified by 40 respondents.

This area is more difficult to measure than pain or range of motion, but this does not mean that it must remain exclusively descriptive.

Contemporary psychological research allows various aspects of body awareness, presence, and self-experience to be operationalized. In the future, both questionnaires and qualitative interviews could therefore be used.

Combining both methods would be particularly valuable. A questionnaire could determine change over time, while an interview could clarify what a participant actually means when describing a "return to oneself," "connection with the body," or "greater presence."

The category of emotions, trauma, and psychological well-being was identified by 37 individuals, representing 30.6% of respondents. It was one of the most important areas appearing in the survey.

At the same time, this is an area in which particular scientific caution is required.

Terms such as "trauma release," "body memory," "regression," or "emotional release" may have different meanings in everyday, therapeutic, and scientific language. The use of a particular term by a practitioner cannot be assumed to constitute confirmation of a specific psychological or neurobiological process.

For this reason, future research should begin with precise definitions of concepts.

If researchers wish to investigate the influence of WATSU® on stress-related symptoms, they should specify which symptoms are being measured. If trauma is of interest, the population must be clearly defined and appropriate diagnostic criteria and instruments applied. If emotional regulation is being investigated, it must be clearly specified how it will be measured.

Only then can the field move from descriptive language toward scientific language.

2. Developmental Needs of the Practitioner Community

Another important component of the study was the identification of topics that practitioners would like to develop. The results show that the needs of the community encompass clinical and psychological issues as well as technical, scientific, and organizational matters.

Table 3. Topics Practitioners Would Like to Develop

Area of interest	Number of responses (n)	Percentage of respondents (%)
Trauma, emotions, and psychological processes	31	25.6
Clinical and rehabilitative applications	21	17.4
Technique, movement, breathing, and fluidity of practice	21	17.4
Scientific research and outcome measurement	18	14.9
Shiatsu, meridians, energy, and the five elements	16	13.2
Work with specific populations	15	12.4
Market development, business, and access to pools	14	11.6
Nervous system regulation	7	5.8

Note: Respondents could identify more than one area; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100%.

The analysis of responses concerning topics that respondents would like to develop and understand better provides an important complement to the findings regarding perceived WATSU® benefits. Whereas the earlier responses identify the effects practitioners most frequently observe in their practice, the analysis of respondents' interests shows which questions and areas they believe require further exploration. In this sense, the survey results can be regarded not only as a description of current perceptions of WATSU®, but also as a starting point for defining future directions for the development of this aquatic work and for designing subsequent scientific studies.

The greatest interest among respondents concerned **trauma, emotions, and psychological processes**. This area was identified by 31 individuals, representing 25.6% of all respondents. The finding corresponds directly with practitioners' earlier observations concerning emotional experiences among people receiving WATSU®. Responses included reports of deep calming, a sense of safety, the ability to let go of control, emotional release, and experiences described as exceptional or transformative. Interest in this area suggests that practitioners recognize a need to better understand the psychological dimension of WATSU® sessions.

At the same time, this is an area requiring particular caution in interpretation. Observing an emotional reaction during a session cannot be equated with confirmation of a particular psychological mechanism, still less with evidence of the effectiveness of WATSU® in trauma therapy. The survey results only allow the conclusion that such experiences are observed by practitioners and constitute an important area of interest for them. Future research should therefore distinguish the level of experience from its interpretation and determine whether the reported phenomena occur consistently and can be objectively or systematically measured.

The second important direction identified by respondents was **clinical and rehabilitative applications**, mentioned by 21 individuals (17.4%). Responses referred, among other areas, to neurology, physiotherapy, orthopedics, chronic pain, rehabilitation, palliative care, and work with people with disabilities. Interest in this area is consistent with findings concerning physical benefits such as pain reduction, muscle relaxation, improved mobility, and support for people with functional limitations.

These findings indicate a need for studies involving specific populations and clearly defined clinical outcomes. In the case of pain, standardized scales of pain intensity could be used; for motor functioning, appropriate functional measurements; and for quality of life, sleep, or psychological well-being, validated questionnaires. This would replace general statements concerning "improvement" with more precise data allowing the magnitude and durability of observed changes to be assessed.

Equally important was interest in **technique, movement, breathing, and fluidity of practice**, identified by 21 respondents (17.4%). This finding suggests that practitioners view the development of WATSU® not only in terms of potential outcomes but also in terms of refining the intervention itself. From a research-methodological perspective, this is particularly important because evaluating the effectiveness of any method requires a sufficiently precise description of the intervention being used. Future work should therefore provide a more detailed description of core session elements, including methods of supporting the body, types and ranges of movement, rhythm, use of breathing, duration of individual components, and the nature of therapeutic contact. Better characterization of the intervention would facilitate both practitioner training and comparison of results across future studies.

Of particular note is that **18 respondents (14.9%) expressed interest in scientific research and outcome measurement**. This is an important signal because it indicates a desire to develop WATSU® not only through practical experience but also through systematic data collection. This finding corresponds with a central assumption of the present study, one of whose aims was precisely to identify areas that could become subjects of further, more advanced scientific investigation.

In this context, it appears particularly important to establish a common set of variables that could be used in subsequent studies. Based on the findings of the present survey, several potential areas can be identified: pain intensity, tension and motor functioning, sleep quality, stress level, psychological well-being, body awareness, and sense of safety. Depending on the study design, these data could be supplemented with physiological parameters and in-depth qualitative interviews. Such an approach would preserve the multidimensional nature of WATSU® while giving individual observations a form that can be subjected to scientific verification.

Another area of interest was **Shiatsu, meridians, energy, and the concept of the five elements**, identified by 16 individuals (13.2%). This finding indicates that for some respondents, an important direction for development remains a deeper exploration of the traditional foundations from which WATSU® emerged. From a scientific research perspective, however, it is necessary to maintain a distinction between traditional explanatory models and hypotheses concerning mechanisms of action that can be subjected to empirical verification. Such a distinction does not exclude the importance of tradition or practical experience, but allows the status of individual claims to be defined precisely.

Work with specific populations was identified by 15 respondents (12.4%). Responses included interest in working with children, pregnant women, people with disabilities, and patients with particular health conditions. This direction appears particularly important from a practical perspective but requires separate research for individual populations. Results observed in healthy adults cannot automatically be assumed to apply to children, people with limited mobility, or neurological patients. Research involving these groups should therefore consider both potential benefits and issues of safety and limitations of applying this aquatic work.

The survey results also indicate that the development of WATSU® is perceived by respondents within a broader organizational and professional context. **Fourteen individuals (11.6%) identified market development, business issues, and access to suitable pools**. Although this area is not directly related to assessing therapeutic outcomes, its practical significance is considerable. The availability of appropriately equipped facilities, operating costs, opportunities for collaboration with rehabilitation and medical institutions, and the development of professional practice models may affect access to WATSU® and the feasibility of future research.

The least frequently identified of the listed areas was **nervous system regulation**, mentioned by 7 individuals (5.8%). This result should be interpreted in relation to the other responses, because nervous system regulation also appeared in descriptions of WATSU® benefits. It is therefore possible that some respondents considered this area more broadly within relaxation, stress reduction, improved sleep, and psychophysical well-being. Future research could nevertheless more precisely determine whether and to what extent WATSU® sessions are associated with changes in physiological responses related to stress and autonomic nervous system arousal.

The respondents' interests therefore indicate a need to progressively move from **describing experiences to operationalizing them and subsequently to empirical verification**. This is likely to be one of the most important directions for the further development of WATSU®. Practitioners' experience can provide valuable observations and hypotheses, but appropriately designed research is needed to determine which observations are reproducible, measurable, and specific to the aquatic work under investigation.

Three mutually complementary directions are particularly important: expanding knowledge of emotional and psychophysiological experiences, determining potential clinical and rehabilitative applications, and developing methods for measuring outcomes. Only by combining these three perspectives may it be possible to create a more comprehensive model for studying WATSU®, encompassing the experience of the person receiving the session, the practitioner's observations, and objectively measurable outcomes.

3. Client Experiences Most Frequently Reported by Practitioners

The next part of the survey concerned what clients were, according to practitioners, most grateful for after sessions.

It should be emphasized that these were not direct responses from clients, but practitioners' reports concerning statements made by people receiving sessions.

Table 4. Client Experiences Most Frequently Reported by Practitioners

Type of experience	Number of responses (n)	Percentage of respondents (%)
Deep relaxation, calm, and rest	61	50.4
Safety, care, trust, and being supported	59	48.8
Release of pain and tension, improved movement	34	28.1
Emotional release and letting go of control	25	20.7
Exceptional or transformative experience	24	19.8
Lightness, freedom, and weightlessness	23	19.0
Connection with oneself, presence, and insight	22	18.2
Better sleep and recovery	10	8.3

Note: Values refer to the number of respondents identifying a given theme; one person could identify more than one category.

The most characteristic finding is the close proximity of the first two categories: deep relaxation (50.4%) and safety, care, and trust (48.8%).

This may indicate that in the WATSU® experience, not only the state of physical relaxation but also the context in which this relaxation occurs may be important.

One of the most interesting findings of the survey is the high frequency of statements concerning safety, care, support, and trust.

Among reports concerning clients, safety, care, trust, and the feeling of being supported were identified by 59 respondents, or 48.8%. This result is almost identical to the proportion identifying deep relaxation—61 individuals, or 50.4%.

This may point to an important characteristic of the WATSU® experience. The person participating in a session does not simply rest in warm water but remains in physical contact with the practitioner, who assumes substantial control over the person's movement and supports their body.

Such a situation may be particularly meaningful for a person accustomed to independently controlling movement and muscular tension.

However, it is important to avoid the simple conclusion that a sense of safety is a mechanism responsible for the effectiveness of WATSU®. At this stage, it is only a hypothesis.

Future studies could examine whether individuals reporting a greater sense of safety experience greater changes in stress, pain, or well-being. It would also be possible to investigate whether the quality of the relationship with the practitioner affects session outcomes.

Responses also included experiences of lightness, freedom, and weightlessness. This area was identified by 19.0% of respondents. Another 19.8% identified exceptional or transformative experiences.

WATSU® makes use of the properties of the aquatic environment, in which buoyancy reduces the load resulting from gravity. For some people, this may represent a very different experience from everyday functioning on land. A person whose body is supported by water and the practitioner may temporarily stop actively controlling many aspects of movement.

Respondents' descriptions therefore include the theme of "letting go of control." This experience may be of interest from both psychological and physiological perspectives.

Some of the client statements reported by practitioners included imagery involving the womb, a mother's arms, being a child, rocking, and complete support.

This is one of the most interesting qualitative themes, but also one of the most susceptible to overinterpretation.

The occurrence of such imagery does not mean that a person is actually experiencing a "return to the womb," recovering prenatal memories, or undergoing therapeutic regression. Such claims would require entirely separate evidence.

A considerably more cautious interpretation is that the specific combination of warmth, rocking, closed eyes, buoyancy, and physical support may evoke associations in some individuals related to primary experiences of safety and care.

This topic appears particularly suitable for qualitative research. Rather than asking whether a person "returned to the womb," researchers could ask how the person describes the experience, what images

emerged, what emotions accompanied them, and what meaning the participant assigns to the experience after the session.

Analysis of the Results – Primarily Directions for Further Research

Combining the results concerning benefits observed by practitioners with the results concerning areas they would like to develop further allows for a more in-depth interpretation of the needs of the WATSU® community. Table 2 primarily presents practitioners' experiences and observations concerning session outcomes, whereas Table 3 identifies areas in which respondents perceive a need for further knowledge. Combining these two datasets is particularly important because it shows that practitioners' areas of interest largely correspond to phenomena they frequently observe in practice, but the two are not always proportional. The difference between the frequency with which a phenomenon is observed and the level of interest in understanding it further may provide an important indication for planning future research.

The most frequently identified WATSU® benefit was **relaxation, stress reduction, and calming**, mentioned by 77 individuals, or 63.6% of respondents. This was by far the highest result among all analyzed benefit areas. At the same time, nervous system regulation, which may be associated with calming and reduced arousal, was identified as an area requiring further development by only 7 individuals (5.8%). This difference is interesting from a research perspective. It may indicate that practitioners frequently observe an effect described as relaxation or calming but relatively rarely conceptualize nervous system regulation as a separate area requiring specialized investigation. It may also mean that the concept of "nervous system regulation" is used in practice as part of a broader relaxation experience.

This discrepancy indicates the need for a more precise definition of what is encompassed by the reported experience of relaxation. Future research should distinguish subjective feelings of relaxation from changes in stress, psychophysiological arousal, or autonomic nervous system functioning. This would make it possible to determine whether the relaxation frequently described by practitioners is associated with measurable physiological and psychological changes. This is particularly important because the current result of 63.6% should be interpreted as the frequency of reports among practitioners, rather than as the proportion of people for whom WATSU® actually produces such an effect.

The second most frequently identified area of benefit was **physical benefits, pain reduction, and improved mobility**, mentioned by 46 respondents (38.0%). At the same time, **clinical and rehabilitative applications** ranked second among the areas practitioners would like to develop, also with 21 responses (17.4%). Taken together, these findings indicate a relatively clear relationship between practical experience and interest in developing clinical applications. Practitioners frequently observe effects related to physical functioning while simultaneously identifying a need to deepen knowledge concerning the use of WATSU® in clinical and rehabilitative contexts.

This represents one of the most concrete directions for future research. In the case of pain, standardized pain-intensity scales could be used, while mobility could be assessed through range-of-motion measurements and functional tests. For specific clinical populations, instruments assessing quality of life, functional capacity, and the ability to perform activities of daily living could

also be applied. Studies designed in this way would help determine whether changes observed by practitioners are reproducible and whether their magnitude is clinically meaningful.

The third frequently identified benefit was **connection with oneself and body awareness**, mentioned by 40 respondents (33.1%). This finding is particularly interesting when considered alongside practitioners' interest in trauma, emotions, and psychological processes, which was the most frequently identified topic for further development—31 individuals (25.6%). Body-based and psychological experiences therefore emerge from the findings as two strongly interconnected areas. Practitioners frequently observe increased body awareness while also wanting to better understand the emotional and psychological dimensions of sessions.

This finding could form the basis for research into the relationship between bodily experience and emotional state. Particularly valuable could be qualitative studies in which people receiving WATSU® independently describe changes in the way they experience their bodies, their sense of safety, emotional tension, and their relationship with the practitioner. Selected observations could subsequently be translated into variables suitable for quantitative measurement.

Emotions, trauma, and psychological well-being were identified as benefits by 37 respondents (30.6%), while trauma, emotions, and psychological processes were simultaneously the most frequently identified area for further interest—31 individuals (25.6%). This is one of the most consistent relationships in the entire analysis. It indicates that the emotional domain is not only frequently observed by practitioners but also represents the area they consider most important to understand further.

This finding should nevertheless be interpreted while maintaining a clear distinction between experience and its explanation. The survey shows that practitioners observe and describe emotional experiences, but it does not establish which mechanisms are responsible for them. Therefore, the data cannot support conclusions regarding the effectiveness of WATSU® for trauma treatment or assign unequivocal psychotherapeutic meaning to specific reactions. Future research should first establish the nature and reproducibility of these experiences and only then test hypotheses concerning their mechanisms.

In this context, investigation of **safety, care, and the therapeutic relationship** appears particularly interesting. These were identified as benefits by 23 individuals (19.0%). This result is similar to the number of responses concerning nervous system regulation, but it did not have a direct counterpart among the most frequently identified areas for further development. This may suggest that the relational dimension of WATSU® is frequently observed by practitioners but is not yet conceptualized to the same extent as an independent area of research.

This may represent an important research gap. If a sense of safety and the experience of being supported appear so frequently in reports concerning sessions, it would be reasonable to develop studies capable of determining the significance of these experiences. At the same time, the influence of therapeutic contact itself should be distinguished from the effects of the aquatic environment, warmth, buoyancy, movement, and rest. Only such an approach would make it possible to determine whether the therapeutic relationship is merely part of the session context or whether it may constitute one of the factors associated with observed outcomes.

Sleep and recovery also deserve attention. They were identified as benefits by 9 respondents (7.4%). Despite the relatively small number of responses, this area may be relevant to future research because sleep quality is a variable that can be relatively easily standardized and monitored. Questionnaires assessing sleep quality, sleep diaries, or other tools appropriate to the research objective could be used. It would also be interesting to determine whether any improvement in sleep is primarily associated with deep relaxation, stress reduction, reduced pain, or other elements of the WATSU® experience.

Analysis of Table 3 also shows that **technique, movement, breathing, and fluidity of practice** were identified by 21 individuals (17.4%), despite not being distinguished as a separate benefit area in Table 2. This indicates an important difference between what practitioners observe as an outcome of sessions and what they consider necessary for further development of their own practice. Respondents therefore recognize a need to refine the way sessions are conducted independently of the final outcome itself. From a scientific perspective, this is highly relevant because precise characterization of the intervention is a prerequisite for its subsequent evaluation.

Future research should therefore describe WATSU® session parameters in greater detail, including duration, methods of supporting the body, types of movement, rhythm, use of breathing, and extent of mobilization. This could reduce variation resulting from differences in individual practitioners' approaches and increase comparability across studies.

Another important finding from Table 3 is interest in **scientific research and outcome measurement**, identified by 18 respondents (14.9%). Combined with the results in Table 2, this area can be considered particularly important for the future development of WATSU®. Practitioners observe numerous potential benefits—from relaxation and stress reduction, through reduced pain and improved mobility, to emotional experiences and a sense of safety—while simultaneously recognizing the need for tools capable of verifying these observations.

Future studies should therefore include both **subjective outcomes**, such as well-being, sense of safety, and perceived relaxation, and **outcomes that can be objectively measured**, such as pain intensity, range of motion, sleep quality, and selected physiological parameters. Particularly valuable would be measurements before the session, immediately after it, and at a specified time following the intervention. This would make it possible to assess both immediate and potentially sustained outcomes.

Further areas of development also include **Shiatsu, meridians, energy, and the five elements**, identified by 16 individuals (13.2%). In this case, the findings indicate a need to balance WATSU®'s traditional heritage with a contemporary scientific approach. Future publications should clearly distinguish between descriptions of traditional practice models, practitioners' experiences, hypotheses concerning mechanisms, and claims supported by empirical research.

Work with specific populations was identified by 15 respondents (12.4%). Combined with the high number of responses concerning physical and psychological benefits, this result indicates a need for research focused on specific populations. Future projects could address, among others, people with limited mobility, children, pregnant women, or individuals with specific neurological conditions or chronic pain. In each case, however, both potential benefits and safety principles would need to be determined separately.

The relatively lower but still meaningful interest in **market development, business, and access to pools**—14 responses (11.6%)—shows that the development of WATSU® is not perceived solely as a scientific or therapeutic issue. Organizational conditions may significantly determine the feasibility of practice and research. Access to appropriately heated pools, usage costs, collaboration with medical and rehabilitation institutions, and opportunities for research funding should be considered part of the broader process of professionalizing aquatic practice.

Comparison of the two tables also reveals an interesting **discrepancy between the frequency of observed benefits and interest in their further development**. The clearest example is relaxation, stress reduction, and calming, identified by 63.6% of practitioners, while nervous system regulation as an area for further development was identified by only 5.8% of respondents. This may indicate a need for education and more precise definition of concepts used in practice. Rather than treating "relaxation" and "nervous system regulation" as equivalent concepts, future research should determine which specific experiences and measurable changes are encompassed by these terms.

A similar relationship can be seen in the case of **sense of safety and therapeutic relationship**. This area was identified as a benefit by 19.0% of respondents but did not appear among the main categories of further interest. This may mean that the relational dimension of WATSU® is an important part of the experience but has not yet been sufficiently developed as an independent research direction. It may therefore represent a potentially important area for future qualitative and psychometric research.

Based on the findings presented, **several mutually complementary directions for future WATSU® research** can be proposed. The first should be to deepen knowledge concerning emotional and psychological experiences, particularly sense of safety, body awareness, and relational experience. The second should be clinical and rehabilitative research focusing on clearly defined populations and measurable outcomes. The third should involve more precise characterization of the intervention itself, including technique, movement, breathing, and conditions under which sessions are conducted. The fourth should involve the development of outcome measurement methods that enable a transition from descriptions of experiences to quantitative data.

Table 5. Priority Directions for Future WATSU® Research

Direction for further research	Main research question	Potential variables / outcomes	Preferred research methods
1. Emotional and psychological experiences	Determine the nature and significance of emotional experiences occurring during or after WATSU® sessions	psychological well-being, stress, emotional tension, body awareness, sense of safety, relational experience	qualitative studies, in-depth interviews, psychometric questionnaires, mixed-methods research
2. Clinical and rehabilitative research	Assess potential applications of WATSU® in clearly defined clinical and rehabilitative populations	pain intensity, range of motion, functioning, muscle tension, physical performance, quality of life	prospective studies, controlled studies, randomized studies, pre- and post-intervention measurements

3. Characterization and standardization of the intervention	Determine which elements of a WATSU® session are essential and how they should be described	session duration, water temperature, types of movement, extent of mobilization, body support, breathwork, rhythm and fluidity of movement	intervention protocols, observation, video analysis, standardized assessment forms, comparative studies
4. Development of outcome measurement methods	Translate participants' subjective experiences into measurable and reproducible indicators	relaxation, stress, pain, sleep, well-being, body awareness, safety, physiological parameters	validated questionnaires, clinical scales, physiological measurements, pre/post and follow-up measurements
5. Autonomic nervous system regulation	Determine whether the experience of relaxation is associated with measurable physiological changes	heart rate, heart rate variability (HRV), blood pressure, respiratory rate, subjective arousal	physiological measurements before, during, and after sessions; prospective studies
6. Therapeutic relationship and sense of safety	Assess the significance of trust, contact, and the experience of being supported for session outcomes	sense of safety, trust, therapeutic relationship quality, satisfaction, experience of care	questionnaires, qualitative interviews, observation, correlational studies
7. Body awareness and self-experience	Investigate whether WATSU® affects perceptions of one's body and experience of presence	body awareness, interoception, presence, connection with the body, self-experience	questionnaires, interviews, mixed methods
8. Sleep and recovery	Assess whether WATSU® sessions influence sleep quality and recovery	sleep quality, sleep onset, awakenings, subjective recovery, fatigue	questionnaires, sleep diaries, repeated measurements, actigraphy where justified

In subsequent stages, controlled studies should be conducted to determine the extent to which observed effects are attributable to the specific characteristics of WATSU® and the extent to which they result from elements common to other forms of aquatic work or relaxation. The influence of water temperature, buoyancy, rest, touch, movement, and the therapeutic relationship should be considered. Such an approach is necessary to distinguish the effects of the specific aquatic intervention from nonspecific effects.

An important element of future research should also be the direct inclusion of people receiving WATSU®. The current analysis is based on practitioners' perspectives, and clients' statements were conveyed through practitioners. Future studies should therefore independently collect participants'

experiences and compare them with practitioners' observations and standardized measurement results. This would reduce the risk of selecting the most positive reports and provide a more balanced picture of outcomes.

It is also important to consider that the respondent group consisted predominantly of people who regularly conduct WATSU® sessions. Of the 121 participants, 100 (82.6%) reported regular practice and 21 (17.4%) did not. Potential differences between these groups could represent an interesting direction for future analysis, but in the present study they should not be interpreted as evidence of an association between practitioner experience and session outcomes. Future research could investigate whether years of practice, number of sessions conducted, and level of training influence the way WATSU® effects are recognized and described.

Overall, the findings indicate that the further development of WATSU® should proceed simultaneously at several levels: practical, clinical, psychological, methodological, and organizational. It is particularly important, however, to maintain a clear sequence between observation, hypothesis formation, and scientific verification. The survey results show which phenomena are frequently noticed by practitioners and which areas generate the greatest interest, but they do not establish causes or confirm the effectiveness of WATSU®.

Summary

The present study was exploratory in nature and was not designed to confirm the clinical effectiveness of WATSU®. Its primary objective was to identify practitioners' experiences and determine areas that may provide a basis for further research. In this context, the findings can be viewed as a map of potential research directions rather than a final assessment of the therapeutic effectiveness of this aquatic work.

The responses of 121 participants show that WATSU® is perceived as a multidimensional experience. Relaxation, stress reduction, and calming were the most strongly represented themes, but physical experiences such as reduced pain and improved mobility also occupied an important place, as did experiences related to body awareness, emotions, and psychological well-being. In reports concerning clients, deep relaxation and a sense of safety, care, and trust appeared particularly frequently.

At the same time, the findings show that practitioners themselves recognize the need for further development of knowledge. The greatest interest concerned trauma, emotions, and psychological processes; clinical and rehabilitative applications; technique; and the development of scientific research and outcome measurement methods. This indicates a clear need to move from knowledge based primarily on practical experience toward knowledge also supported by systematically collected and analyzed data.

The most important outcome of the present study is therefore not the identification of a single dominant "WATSU® effect," but the identification of areas requiring further, more precise investigation. Particularly promising areas include research on relaxation and stress, pain and functioning, body awareness, sense of safety, therapeutic relationship, emotional experiences, and parameters associated with autonomic nervous system regulation.

WATSU® is therefore at an interesting stage of development in which practitioners' experience can serve as a source of hypotheses for subsequent research projects. It will nevertheless be essential to maintain a clear distinction between what is observed, what is interpreted, and what has been empirically confirmed.

The future of WATSU® research should therefore be based on the integration of practical knowledge, the experiences of people receiving sessions, and rigorous research methods. Such an approach will not only improve understanding of the WATSU® experience but also help determine in which areas this aquatic work may have genuine therapeutic value, for whom it may be most useful, which elements of a session may account for observed outcomes, and what the limits of its application are.

In this sense, the present survey may be regarded as the first stage in building a research program on WATSU®. Its greatest value lies not in providing definitive answers, but in identifying questions that can now be posed in a more precise, measurable, and scientifically verifiable manner.

Ultimately, the further development of WATSU® should not involve choosing between practical experience and science. The most valuable direction lies in their integration: practice can indicate what is worth studying, participants' experiences can show how that experience may be understood, and scientific methodology can determine which observations are reproducible, measurable, and genuinely associated with the intervention being studied. Such a model of development may provide a solid foundation for future WATSU® research and contribute to a more precise understanding of the place of this aquatic work within bodywork, relaxation, rehabilitation, and broader well-being.