

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Neurologic Physical Therapy Residents through Narrative Reflections: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

Physical therapy residency programs have been growing exponentially over the past several years as a means for physical therapists, often early career professionals, to pursue specialty clinical practice. However, research into the impact of these programs remains limited. The purpose of this study is to perform a thematic analysis of reflective narratives submitted by neurologic physical therapy residents to identify themes that describe and clarify the lived experience of residents during their specialty training programs.

Background & Purpose

While medical residency programs have been well studied and well described, little has been written about the experiences of physical therapists participating in residency programs. Thematic analysis of the reflective writings of neurologic physical therapy residents, crafted using the Gibbs Model, will add to contemporary medical and physical therapy education literature. Inductive qualitative analysis will allow researchers to identify meaning statements and themes, and discover how these themes relate to physical therapy residency experiences and the educational impact.

Methods

This is a phenomenological study of reflective narrative writings collected between 2016-2021. The reflective narratives are being inductively analyzed resulting in the condensation and identification of themes describing the lived experience of physical therapy residents. The themes will be used to highlight impacts of residency education on participants.

NVivo software is being used to store, organize, and analyze deidentified data. Five researchers will conduct data analysis: two primary coders, two secondary coders, and one quality checker. Codes and meaning statements will be reviewed, discussed and authenticated among coders, then compiled into one standardized document. Peer checking will establish trustworthiness of project findings, will occur as a result of team discussions over the course of the project data analysis.

Population

The population being studied is neurologic physical therapy residents who were enrolled in the Neurologic Professional Physical Therapy Education Consortium and neurologic residency programs across the United States from 2016-2021.

Results

Statistical analysis has yet to be conducted on the significance of the codes and emergent themes based on prevalence used in the narratives. However, clear patterns can already be seen in the writings reviewed to date. Residency programs could play a pivotal role in influencing early career professionals in: dealing with being a novice practitioner; moving from therapist to patient focused care; and dealing with complexity in various aspects of clinical care.

Coding Examples:

- **Dealing with complex emotions:** “I felt guilty for even thinking it was psychological in nature, I could not push it aside, especially when my mentor felt the same way”
- **Novice clinician, self-confidence:** “I felt constantly like I had no control over the situation and like I was not being respected as a clinician. I was unable to consistently and effectively provide cueing and feedback. I often felt like the primary therapist allowed the patient to disrespect my judgement.”
- **Patient centered care:** “I knew as I was taking in the information my patient was giving me that she had of experience walking and also years of experience expressing her own authority and control, because otherwise she would lose her independence.”

Conclusion

Additional qualitative and quantitative studies are needed to determine the impacts of residency training on physical therapists entering into specialty practice. Early data from this study highlight several themes that further our understanding of educational impact of residency education.

Study Team

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