


RESEARCH ARTICLE (ORIGINAL) 

## Motivations for the transitional experience of students in the nursing specialization degree


*Motivações para a experiência transicional das estudantes do curso de especialização em enfermagem*

*Motivaciones para la experiencia de transición de las estudiantes de especialización en enfermería*

Rosana Maria de Oliveira Silva<sup>1</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3371-6550>


Josicélia Dumêt Fernandes<sup>1</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2946-5314>


Maria Deolinda Antunes Luz Lopes Dias Maurício<sup>2</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6565-1694>


Lázaro Souza da Silva<sup>1</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1841-751X>

Gilberto Tadeu Reis da Silva<sup>1</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0595-0780>

Ana Lúcia Arcanjo Oliveira Cordeiro<sup>1</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0375-7709>

<sup>1</sup> Federal University of Bahia, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil

<sup>2</sup> Lisbon Nursing School, Lisbon, Portugal

### Corresponding author

Rosana Maria de Oliveira Silva

E-mail: [rosanaosilva@hotmail.com](mailto:rosanaosilva@hotmail.com)

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### Abstract

**Background:** The transitional experience of nurse residents occurs through intentional changes motivated by the possibility of enhancing their practice.

**Objective:** To analyze the motivations for the transitional experience of former students of the nurse residency program in a municipality in Northeast Brazil.

**Methodology:** Cross-sectional exploratory study carried out with 40 former students of the nurse residency program. The semi-structured interview technique with a guide was used for data collection. Data were analyzed through content analysis.

**Results:** The category Motivations for the transitional experience emerged, which discusses the motivators influencing the transitional experience. Three subcategories also emerged: Need to enhance knowledge and experience clinical practice; Undergraduate training is insufficient; and Previous experience in practical settings.

**Conclusion:** The completion of the nurse residency program is a transitional experience motivated by the possibilities of improving nurses' practice.

**Keywords:** education, nursing, graduate; specialization; nursing

### Resumo

**Enquadramento:** A experiência transicional de especialistas de enfermagem ocorre por meio de mudanças intencionais motivadas pela possibilidade de qualificar o exercício profissional.

**Objetivo:** Analisar as motivações para a experiência transicional das egressas do curso de especialização em Enfermagem de um município do Nordeste do Brasil.

**Metodologia:** Estudo transversal e exploratório realizado com 40 enfermeiras egressas do curso de especialização em enfermagem na modalidade de residência. Para a colheita dos dados foi utilizada a técnica de entrevista semiestruturada com roteiro norteador. Os dados obtidos foram analisados à luz da análise de conteúdo.

**Resultados:** O estudo possibilitou a construção da categoria motivações para a experiência transicional, que discute as motivações para a experiência transicional, o que resultou em três subcategorias temáticas - necessidade de aprofundar o conhecimento e vivenciar a prática; insuficiência da graduação; e experiência prévia em cenários de prática.

**Conclusão:** A realização do curso de especialização é uma experiência transicional motivada pelas possibilidades de qualificar o exercício profissional de enfermeiras.

**Palavras-chave:** educação de pós-graduação em enfermagem; especialização; enfermagem

### Resumen

**Marco contextual:** La experiencia de transición de las residentes de enfermería se produce a través de cambios intencionales motivados por la posibilidad de cualificarse en su ejercicio profesional.

**Objetivo:** Analizar las motivaciones de la experiencia de transición de las estudiantes de especialización en enfermería en un municipio del noreste de Brasil.

**Metodología:** Estudio transversal y exploratorio realizado con 40 enfermeras de los estudios de especialización en enfermería, en la modalidad de residencia. Para recopilar los datos se utilizó la técnica de la entrevista semiestruturada con guión dirigido según el análisis de contenido.

**Resultados:** El estudio hizo posible la construcción de la categoría "motivaciones de la experiencia de transición", en la que se examinan las motivaciones de la experiencia de transición, lo que dio lugar a tres subcategorías temáticas, necesidad de profundizar en el conocimiento y experimentar la práctica; la insuficiencia de la graduación, y la experiencia previa en los escenarios de la práctica.

**Conclusión:** La realización de los estudios de especialización es una experiencia de transición motivada por las posibilidades de las enfermeras para cualificarse en su ejercicio profesional.

**Palabras clave:** educación de posgrado en enfermería; especialización; enfermería



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## Introduction

The nurse residency program results from a collaboration between the university and the health services. It is a postgraduate experience designed to develop skills and knowledge for nursing practice in a specific area of expertise because it allows nurses to experience the daily work in the health area (Cline, La Frenz, Fellman, Summers, & Brassil, 2017; Oliveira et al., 2017).

In Brazil, there are currently 973 nurse residency programs in 273 academic programs, which demonstrates their importance in nursing education and healthcare practices in the Brazilian Unified Health System (*Sistema Único de Saúde*).

These professionals' transitional experience in care delivery settings, in the search for knowledge and skill enhancement, is procedural and occurs throughout their training process.

The program enhances their technical and scientific knowledge, increasing the safety in the performance of care delivery techniques for a humanized and comprehensive care. It also allows for the development of the nurse's clinical reasoning and decision-making skills, facilitating his/her growth as a professional, improving the working conditions, and leading to a faster integration into the job market (Showalter et al., 2017; Silva, Cordeiro, Fernandes, Silva, & Teixeira, 2014) while allowing the development of personal and professional marketing.

Residency programs were mainly designed to train new graduate nurses and successfully promote their transition to specialist nurses, improving their performance and their confidence in their role as professionals (Scherzer, Dennis, Swan, Kavuru, & Oxman, 2017).

Cline et al. (2017) found that recent graduates enroll in these programs to obtain the necessary skills to deliver quality care, boost their confidence in the performance of their tasks as professional, as well as to facilitate their integration into the job market.

Other motivations for enrolling in a residency program are salary raise expectations, opportunities for career advancement, professional enhancement, and the possibility of expanding their network of relationships with people who work in the same area of expertise.

Other influencing factors were the changes in the country's political and social context. The increase in the number of vacancies in nursing undergraduate degrees and the increasing unemployment in this professional category seem to influence the high demand for a vacancy in this type of programs, as well as the financing of study grants for specialization students and the possibility of immediate insertion in the job market.

In view of the above, investigating the motivations for the transitional experience of former students of the nurse residency program is important because it will provide scientific knowledge for understanding the context and informing the development of interventions for increasing the number of vacancies and creating new programs. These actions aim at meeting the nurses' needs and improving the structure of residency program.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the motivations for

the transitional experience of former students of the nurse residency program in a municipality in Northeast Brazil.

## Background

A transitional experience is a change that occurred between two stable periods during which the individual is guided to move through different dynamic stages, milestones, and turning points. This transition is complex and multidimensional, presenting characteristics such as awareness, commitment, change and difference, time interval, and critical points and events. In nursing literature, the four identified types of transition are: developmental, health-illness, organizational, and situational (Meleis, 2017).

Thus, the motivations for the nurses' transitional experience during the residency program are influenced by changes resulting from a situational transition, assuming that it was intentional and planned (Meleis, 2017).

Concerning the intentional typification of the transitional experience, the decision to find and follow one's own path and experience a transition in the residency program aims to transform the situation or the reality being experienced into another one that responds better to the concerns regarding the profession and the experience of being a nurse (Meleis, 2017; Silva et al., 2017).

When considering the situational transition, it is important to plan both personal and professional lives, for which reason this transition can also be seen as a planned transition. The transitional experience emerges from motivations that can generate changes, which, in this study, was the successful completion of the nurse residency program.

The nurse residency program is characterized by the professional's direct immersion into caring for the patient because it provides nurses with the opportunity to experience the daily work in the health area while enhancing their theoretical and scientific understanding of the caring process (Oliveira et al., 2017).

Nurses use specific professional skills during their practice, combining technical-scientific knowledge, technological mastery, humanization, and quality in care delivery. Keeping up with the complexity of health systems requires a continuous update to change practices and develop skills that may assist nurses in their work process, namely their ability to face possible challenges (Leal, Soares, Silva, Bernardes, & Camelo, 2018).

In their professional practice, nurses are expected to: identify the health needs of the population; formulate and assess health problems; develop, implement, and assess the implementation of the care plan and monitor its outcomes; ensure the continuity of care; and participate in the organization and monitoring of the work process in the health area (Leal et al., 2018).

## Research Question

What were the motivations for the transitional experience of former students of the nurse residency program in a municipality in Northeast Brazil?



## Methodology

A cross-sectional and descriptive-exploratory study was conducted based on Afaf Meleis' Middle-Range Theory of Transitions. This theory underlines the importance of the concept and the process of transition and its implications for nursing practice regarding promotion, prevention, and intervention, and the increase of specific knowledge on nursing science (Meleis, 2017).

Forty former students of the nurse residency program participated in this study. The inclusion criteria were living in the State of Bahia and completing the program between 1996 and 2009. The exclusion criteria were being on holiday or leave during the data collection period.

The snowball sampling technique was used, in which the first selected subjects were asked to identify other potential subjects (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The participants were explained the inclusion criteria and asked to identify other nurses who met these criteria.

Data were collected by the first author between January and March 2012, in the development of the research matrix "Professional trajectory of the nurse in the multi-professional residency programs in health and health professional area in the state of Bahia", financed by the Federal University of Bahia, through the Support Program to Young PhDs (Prorectorate for Research – PROPESQ). The semi-structured interview was used, including a guide with questions to understand the motivations for the participants' transitional experience.

The interviews occurred in the hospital units where the participants worked, in a place chosen by the interviewees, thus avoiding interruptions by third parties.

At the beginning of the interview, the participants were explained the study objectives and the potential consequences of the research process, as well as ensured their anonymity and that of the interview venue. The participants were given the letter of invitation to participate in the research and asked to fill out and sign two copies of the Informed Consent Form, one for the researcher and one for the participant to keep. They were also asked to consent to the digital recording of the interview. Each interview lasted 90 minutes on average.

A total of 94 hours and 42 minutes were transcribed. Express Scribe 5.20 professional software was used to control the audio playback and the following steps were considered: full transcription, textualization, and participants' consultation. The participants were asked to read the transcription to check for differences between what was said and what was written and authorize its use.

A thematic content analysis was performed on the narratives, which allowed making inferences about the information found, considering the context in which they were said, and moving the analysis from descriptive to analytical. The research followed the three stages of content analysis: pre-analysis, material exploration, and treatment, inference, and interpretation of results (Bardin, 2009). During pre-analysis, the material from the interviews was organized, and a free-floating reading was performed.

During the second stage - material exploration - the research corpus was reread, and the contexts units started to be identified: sentences, that is, paragraphs of the corpus that represent the favorable and unfavorable conditions of the participants' transitional experience. The third and final stage - treatment, inference, and interpretation of results - was performed based on Afaf Meleis' Transitions Theory.

To ensure participant anonymity, an alphanumeric coding system was used. Each interviewee received the code name "I" followed by a number corresponding to the order of the interviews (I.1, I.2, I.3... I.40).

To ensure the rights and duties of the scientific community, the participant, and the State, the study was conducted according to Resolution 466 of 12 December 2012, in compliance with the guidelines and regulations for research involving human beings and the basic principles of bioethics (Ministério da Saúde, Conselho Nacional de Saúde, 2012). The Ethics and Research Committee of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) approved the project under opinion no. 35/2010.

## Results

Based on the analysis of the interviews of the former students of the nurse residency program, the motivations for the transitional experience were identified and analyzed. These motivations were organized into three subcategories: Need to enhance knowledge and experience clinical practice, Undergraduate training is insufficient, and Previous experience in practical settings.

### **Need to enhance knowledge and experience clinical practice**

In this subcategory, the participants reported the need to enhance their knowledge and experience clinical practice as a reason to enroll in the program:

"Need for more in-depth knowledge that would support my practice" (I.1; January 2012).

"I was a student who always sought knowledge but I felt that I needed something deeper that would give me more practice" (I.4; January 2012). These statements reflect the nurses' need to enhance their knowledge as one of the reasons to enroll in the residency program. This program is mainly characterized by the heavy workload during the internship in real working environments, complemented by theoretical content in a given area of knowledge.

The nurses decided to enroll in the Residency Program to acquire specific knowledge due to the possibilities offered by this program and their expectations, seeing it as a way to meet their needs and have several professional experiences.

"When I was researching about the program and what it would offer me, I realized that it had internships" (I.4; January 2012).

The Residency Program combines practice and theory, promoting the construction and reconstruction of these elements. Thus, the students acquire more solid knowledge to work in specialized areas.

### Undergraduate training is insufficient

The interviewees reported that undergraduate training was insufficient to work in specialized areas. They reported the little amount of time spent in internships when considering the purpose of becoming differentiated professionals: “When we graduate, we are a bit lost because when we do the internships, they go by so fast, not enough time, only a few hours not enough hours” (I.27; March 2012).

There is a lack of undergraduate training; it offers very little, time is short, it is the minimum, our area demands much more, it is much more complex and it’s an area that grows and changes a lot and we can never stop studying. (I.3; January 2012)

The nurses also reported that: “We graduate with limited knowledge, it’s not even limited, it’s not enough for our practice” (I.3; January 2012).

“I have a personal reason for enrolling in the Residency Program, I was feeling very unprepared for the market” (I.6; January 2012).

### Previous experience in practical settings

Another reason mentioned by the former students of the nurse residency program was their previous experience in the area, as mentioned in the following statements:

“During my undergraduate degree, I did an internship at an ICU, it was something that made me do this” (I.2; January 2012).

I went to the ICU of public hospital X and it fascinated me. I had the opportunity to experience the unit’s routine and observe critically ill patients, it’s a trauma unit, and I became more and more fascinated by it. Since then, I fell in love with working at the ICU. (I.7; January 2012)

The statements show that the nurses who immediately enrolled in the nurse residency program after having completed the undergraduate degree decided to do the residency program after having completed internships in related areas during their undergraduate degree or after professional experiences in Surgical or Intensive Care areas.

When I came to the course exam selection, I had already contacted with the ICU in Feira de Santana. I liked the experience and was interested in the ICU, although it was a semi-intensive unit. The wish to work in ICU started there. (I.22; March 2012)

When I had access, as a grant holder of the nurse residency program, . . . that was when I stopped and looked at those nurses from that program, and at the materials in my hands and said that it was what I wanted to do. I made that choice. (I.15; February 2012).

The reports of previous experiences in practical settings are considered learning modalities because they allow learning to occur in real-life work environments, allowing the professional to reflect on his/her experience in the profession.

## Discussion

The need to enhance knowledge and experience clinical practice was one of the reasons that led nurses to enroll

in the program. Thus, by pursuing further professional training in a residency program, the nurses aim to move from generalist nurses, which is the origin of their training and is established in the Curricular Guidelines of the Nursing Degree, to specialist nurses. This transition implies the nurses’ immersion in a systematized learning process. Hence, the individual must look for new knowledge and skills when transitioning from one work area to another (Meleis, 2017).

The nurses’ perceived need to enhance their knowledge and experience clinical practice demonstrates their commitment to professional training. Commitment is understood as the individual’s degree of engagement with the transitional experience. The individual only commits if he/she is aware of the transition process he/she is in. The search for information and knowledge is an example of commitment (Meleis, 2017).

Training through a residency program enhances knowledge because it combines two areas of training: the university and the health care services. By committing to training, these institutions provide the professional with the conditions to acquire knowledge in a given area of expertise (Oliveira et al., 2017).

The residency program is based on the assumption that learning depends on the student’s will and ability to build an optimized training and fulfil him/herself professionally. The paradigm of knowledge is a priority, placing the individual as the subject of his/her learning process and as co-responsible for the quality of his/her training. Thus, the specialist nurse’s training should be based on associating the theoretical-practical knowledge with the political, social, and cultural issues inherent to the human being and the ethical-moral values of the profession (Yama, Hodgins, Boydell, & Schwartz, 2018).

Another reason reported by the nurses was that their undergraduate training was insufficient considering the little amount of time spent on the development of practices. In the discussion about nursing education in Brazil, one of the aims for undergraduate education is to ensure that autonomous professionals are trained to provide quality care to the population, thus ensuring the delivery of comprehensiveness and humanized care (Fernandes et al., 2020).

Moreover, in their initial training as generalist nurses, nursing students are required to acquire multidisciplinary contents, with a minimum workload, during short periods of time, with few opportunities in several practical settings, which prevents them from developing the skills necessary to safely carry out their practice.

In Brazil, a study with 21 healthcare professionals who completed their undergraduate and specialization found that they still feel insecure, unprepared, and inexperienced after their undergraduate training because they require health management, emotional, and decision-making skills, as well as knowledge of themselves and the people who will receive their care, mainly in the areas of specialty offered in nurse residency programs (Ramos & Rennó, 2018).

Considering that the insertion into the job market is increasingly competitive, it is understandable that the

nurses feel insecure about performing their tasks and search for training courses, which can be seen as a situational transition.

The transition can be perceived when, considering their trajectory from undergraduates to nurses, the graduates realize that the undergraduate degree trains generalist nurses. This awareness, associated with the individual's perception of knowledge and the recognition of a transitional experience, influences the nurse residents' degree of engagement in the transition (Meleis, 2017).

When in the job market, nurses end up receiving new training based on their personal experience and the culture and philosophy of the institution where they work. Thus, the fragile relationship between training and professional practice triggers feelings of insecurity, fear, and desire to fill the gaps in their undergraduate training (Jesus, Sena, Souza, Pereira, & Santos, 2015).

Therefore, when competing for a vacancy in the job market, the professionals search for a specialization degree to differentiate themselves and meet the prerequisites for access to the market.

At this point, the specialization degree often becomes the only possibility for the nurses to meet these needs and facilitate their insertion in the job market. It can be considered a milestone in these professionals' redefinition, mostly due to their perception that generalist training would not prepare them with the skills and scientific knowledge required in any area of nursing (Jesus et al., 2015).

Not far from this reality, the transitional experience was also motivated by the need for a previous experience in practical settings because, during their initial training, they felt the need to do internships to be better prepared for the job market.

Considering that transitions are procedural and occur over time, the previous experience in practical settings mentioned by some nurses is an indicator of the transition process (Meleis, 2017). They are important because it is through them that it is possible to discover and clarify the behaviors arising from the transition. As mentioned above, the previous experience drove the choice of the residency program.

The insertion in the job market allows the newly graduates to acquire new and specific knowledge, reflect on their professional performance, redefine their professional identity, understand moral-ethical values, and identify the weaknesses of their training regarding specific areas of action, which will trigger the need to continue their training. Thus, previous experiences influence the individual's expectations about the outcome of the transitional experience (Meleis, 2017).

It should be noted that, during their undergraduate training, the practical workload and the hours of internship allow the nurse residents to experience several real-life work environments and develop themselves both personally and professionally.

The seventh article of the National Curriculum Guidelines for Undergraduate Nursing Degrees, regulated by resolution no. 3 of the National Education Council and Higher Education Chamber, of 7 November 2001, states

that undergraduate degrees must include a supervised internship in their political-pedagogical projects, in addition to the theoretical-practical content. These internships should take place in general and specialized hospitals, healthcare centers, and communities in the last two semesters (Conselho Nacional de Educação, Câmara de Educação Superior, 2001).

Today professionals are trained to use their general and specific skills, in addition to those skills developed through the students' conceptions as the subjects of their training process, the combination between theory and practice, and the diversification of learning scenarios in the internships in several healthcare sectors (Silva, Fernandes, Teixeira, & Silva, 2010).

When learning occurs in real-life work situations during internships, it is possible to implement multi- and transdisciplinary relationships, identify and experience power games, and understand the units' dynamics, organizational structure, and ethical-legal principles involved in inter-professional relationships, the relationship with the users (either the client /or their families), and make decisions when faced with unpredictable situations.

In this context, examples include those associated with the acquisition, development, and evaluation of competencies and skills, essential contents, practices, and internships because these are the skills that will meet the professional's training needs and objectives (Silva et al., 2010).

Thus, previous experience in practical settings of the selected area of expertise also allowed students to know the area and connect with it or not, thus reducing the incompatibility, dissatisfaction, and the acceptance of an employment contract in an area that is not compatible with the professional's skills. Hence, these previous experiences were external stimuli that impelled nurses to enroll in the residency program and, consequently, to experience the transition.

A limitation of this study is that it was performed in a single reality in Northeastern Brazil, which makes it impossible to generalize to the universe of students in residency programs. Nevertheless, the participants and the selected context for this study can be considered representative at a regional level.

This study provides knowledge about the transitional experience of residents in residency programs in the State of Bahia. In addition, it contributes to the development of further studies on the motivations for the transitional experience in other education institutions that offer residency programs.

## Conclusion

Through interviews and thematic analysis, this study demonstrated that the motivations for the transitional experience of former students of the nurse residency program were associated with previous experience in practical settings of related areas and the need to enhance knowledge and experience clinical practice to make up for the insufficient training received during the undergraduate degree.

Previous experiences in practical settings can guide undergraduates in their choice of the area of expertise. They are learning opportunities that allow undergraduates to reflect on their role in the profession while supporting and guiding their professional trajectory.

The need to enhance knowledge and experience clinical practice is motivated by the pedagogical structure of the specialization degree, which is traditionally known by the heavy workload of internship in real-life work environments and the combination between practice and theory, providing more solid knowledge for students to use in their areas of expertise.

The fact that their undergraduate training was insufficient is a motivation for the transitional experience due to the participants' inexperience and insecurity. These feelings result from an inconsistency between the participants' expectations when starting their training and those experienced when completing it.

It should be noted that the nurse residents' motivations for the transitional experience favor the situational transition process given that it is intentional and planned with a view to achieving professional changes.

Further studies are recommended on the professionals' motivations regarding their choices and experiences to inform professional training projects in nursing specialization degrees. More programs in this format should be offered to meet the nurses' expectations regarding the development of skills for improving the quality of work.

#### Authors contribution

Conceptualization: Silva, R. M. O., Fernandes, J. D., Maurício, M. D. A. L. L. D., Silva, L. S., Silva, G. T. R., Cordeiro, A. L. A. O.

Data curation: Silva, R. M. O.

Formal analysis: Silva, R. M. O., Fernandes, J. D., Maurício, M. D. A. L. L. D.

Methodology: Silva, R. M. O., Fernandes, J. D., Maurício, M. D. A. L. L. D., Silva, L. S., Silva, G. T. R., Cordeiro, A. L. A. O.

Writing – original draft: Silva, R. M. O., Fernandes, J. D.

Writing – review & editing: Silva, R. M. O., Fernandes, J. D., Maurício, M. D. A. L. L. D., Silva, L. S., Silva, G. T. R., Cordeiro, A. L. A. O.

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