

THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF FEMALE NURSES: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

IDENTIDADE PROFISSIONAL DA ENFERMEIRA: UMA REVISÃO INTEGRATIVA

LA IDENTIDAD PROFESIONAL DE LA ENFERMERA: REVISIÓN INTEGRATIVA

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Objective: identifying the main findings by scientific articles on the professional nurse identity. Method: this is an integrative literature review, developed through a bibliographic research involving scientific articles on the theme. The Virtual Health Library database was used. The final sample was made up of 12 scientific publications. To analyze data, the technique of content analysis was applied. Results: the data made clear that the professional identity of nurses is related to a religious meaning, intersecting with military and professional relations of meaning, which derive from the origins of the profession. Conclusion: the professional nurse identity is strongly related to religious issues, has been influenced by military organization, and presents signs that show its objective of being recognized as a profession and a science.

Descriptors: Nurses, Female. Social Identification. Women, Working.

Objetivo: identificar os principais achados em artigos científicos sobre a identidade profissional da enfermeira. Método: estudo do tipo revisão integrativa da literatura, desenvolvido com base na pesquisa bibliográfica sobre artigos científicos a respeito do tema. Utilizada a base de dados da Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde. Compuseram a amostra final 12 publicações científicas. Para análise dos dados, utilizou-se a técnica de análise de conteúdo. Resultados: os dados evidenciaram que a identidade profissional da enfermeira está relacionada com o sentido religioso, com intercessões com os sentidos militar e profissional oriundos da origem da profissão. Conclusão: a identidade profissional da enfermeira está fortemente relacionada com a questão religiosa, sofreu influência da organização militar e apresenta indícios que demonstram seu objetivo de se firmar como profissão e ciência.

Descritores: Enfermeira. Identificação Social. Trabalho Feminino.

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Objetivo: identificar las mayores descubiertas de artículos científicos sobre la identidad profesional de la enfermera. Método: revisión integrativa de la literatura, desarrollada por medio de una investigación bibliográfica de artículos científicos sobre el tema. Se utilizó la base de datos de la Biblioteca Virtual en Salud. La muestra final se constituyó de 12 publicaciones científicas. Para analizar los datos, se utilizó la técnica de análisis de contenido. Resultados: los datos indicaron que la identidad profesional de la enfermera está relacionada con su sentido religioso y tiene intersecciones con los sentidos militar y profesional, todos derivados de los orígenes de la profesión. Conclusión: la identidad profesional de la enfermera está fuertemente relacionada con la religión, sufrió interferencias de la organización militar, y presenta indicativos del objetivo de establecerse como profesión y ciencia.

Descriptor: Enfermera. Identificación social. Trabajo femenino.

Introduction

Identity, presented as a complex and broad concept, has frequently been employed to understand the introduction of a single subject in the world and its relation to itself and others⁽¹⁾. It can be understood as a source of meaning and experience for a people, a source that is not fixed or stable, but historically and socially built, and as a result, the subject of transformation. It includes the articulation of what is part of an individual and how they imagine being perceived by others⁽²⁻³⁾.

One of the modalities of identity is the professional one, described as “[...] socially recognized ways for individuals to identify one another in the field of work and employment”(4:17). A modality of identity gives specificity and characteristics to an individual, which will allow them to have a collective and social identity that is based on the possession of specific scientific and technical knowledge related to their professional field, which allows them to exercise a certain profession⁽⁵⁾. Building professional identities results from the articulation between individual and collective identities. The process of professional socialization involves the acquisition of identity and the development of feelings of belonging, which are essential to the consolidation of professional identities⁽⁶⁾.

When it comes to the professional identity of nurses, many studies raise questions regarding its very absence. This professional field presents many historic and social determinants that place it in a trench of social exclusion, subjection, invisibility, lack of identity of professionals who

represent the profession, technically focused education, proletarian bases, with gender as its greater determinant, being related to the social construction of women⁽⁷⁾.

The construction of the professional identity of the nurses must be permeated by ties of identification to the profession, sewn into their daily lives and expressed through positive and negative feelings regarding the profession⁽⁸⁾. Therefore, the nurse may be recognized due to historical events related to the work they execute, gender issues, religion, and sociopolitical actions in the field of health.

Among the justifications to carry out this study, the expressive number of nursing professionals in Brazil stand out: more than 400 thousand (481.281) nurses, nearly one million (1.108.774) nursing technicians, and approximately 425 thousand (426.022) nursing auxiliaries. In Bahia, the state in which the researchers developed this study, there are, on average, 33 thousand (33.026) nurses, 70 thousand (71.715) nursing technicians, and 14 thousand (14.638) auxiliaries⁽⁹⁾.

However, despite the expressive contingent and the numerical relevance of nurses in the health team, their professional identity is found to be frail and filled with conflict. This also affects the quality and/or management of the care offered by these professionals, as well as in the lack of clarity these workers have regarding their essential attributions and how pivotal their position is in the work process of health, from the perspective of managers, users,

health professionals, and nursing professionals themselves⁽⁷⁻⁸⁾.

With regards to these considerations, the following research question was elaborated: What are the main findings in scientific articles regarding the professional identity of the nurses?

The objective of this article is identifying the main findings by scientific articles on the professional nurse identity.

Method

This is an integrative literature review, developed through a bibliographic research of scientific articles on the theme.

Integrative reviews are literature reviews that gather data from theoretical and empirical literature, including studies with different methodological approaches (quantitative and qualitative)⁽¹⁰⁻¹¹⁾. It consists in the elaboration of a broader literature analysis, which contributes for discussions regarding methods and results of researches, leading to considerations about the performance of other investigations⁽¹²⁾. It also makes it possible to synthesize the results of many different studies and debates with regards to a specific field of knowledge⁽¹¹⁾.

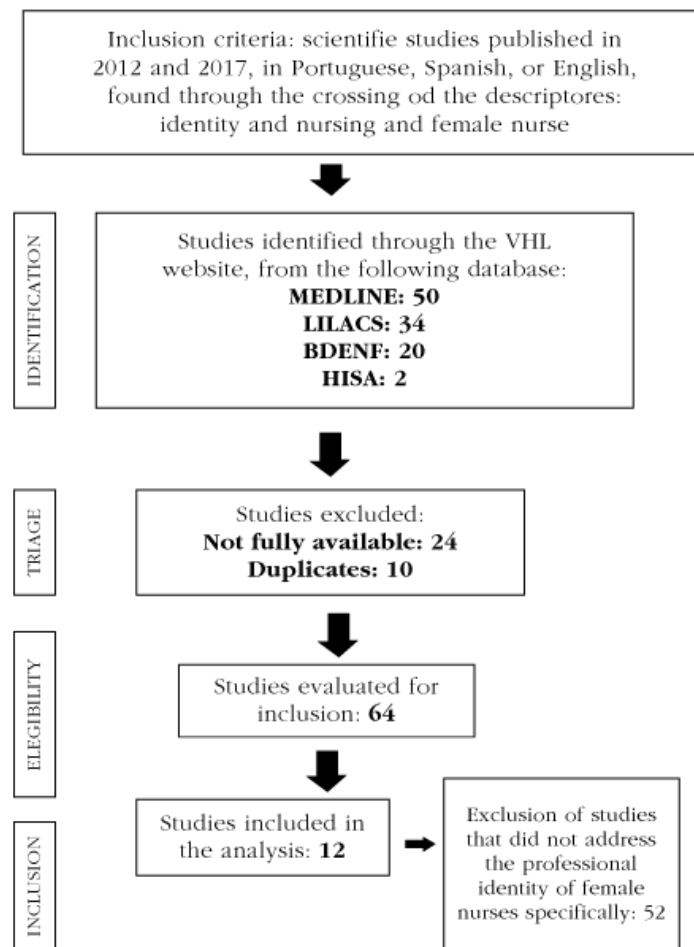
This type of review is capable of generating a source of updated knowledge about an issue, determining if said knowledge can be used in practice. However, it requires the adoption of methodologically rigorous standards, so that

the reader can identify the main features of the studies analyzed⁽¹³⁾.

This study carried out a bibliographic survey of the Virtual Health Library (VHL). This database was chosen because, according to the premises on which it is based, it is targeted for health professionals, and involves all countries from Latin America and the Caribbeans, having one of the best collections of relevant information on the effects of health interventions. Other databases are also integrated in its scope, such as LILACS, IBECs, MEDLANE, Cochrane, and SciELO.

To be included, articles needed to: have been published from 2012 to 2017, in Portuguese, Spanish, or English, and be found via the crossing of the descriptors: identity and nursing and female nurses. The period chosen to carry out data collection — 2012 to 2017 — was chosen so the information thus found would be updated. Also, the objective of the study is finding the main results on the professional identity of female nurses which are coherent with the present times.

A total of 98 articles was found, after the following were eliminated per the exclusion criteria of this study: incomplete publications, duplicate articles, and studies that did not specifically address the professional identity of female nurses. The final sample was made up of 12 scientific publications. Flowchart 1 shows the process of study selection.

Flowchart 1 – Selection of studies for the integrative review

Source: Created by the authors.

To make it easier to obtain the data from each research, this study used a collection instrument based on the model proposed by Ursi and Pompeu, which allowed for the extraction of information in a systematic and efficient manner⁽¹³⁻¹⁴⁾. The instrument comprised the following items: title, periodic and year of publication, name of the authors, research objectives, research methodology, and main findings (results and conclusions). The collection of the data that make up this review took part from September to October 2017.

The analysis of the research included in an integrative review is complex, requires time and knowledge from the researcher. Therefore, it must be carried out carefully, aiming to find explanations for the different or conflicting results from the many researches analyzed⁽¹¹⁻¹²⁾.

Therefore, a chart-synthesis was created, with information pertaining to each study. The content analysis technique was used to analyze the results.

Regarding the ethical aspects of this research, the authors of all studies used to elaborate the integrative review were carefully referred to, as was any other pertinent information. Since this is a review, meaning it uses only secondary data, which come from other studies, there was no need to subject this study to the appreciation of a Research Ethics Committee⁽¹⁵⁾.

Results

In Charts 1 to 3 there is a synthesis of the articles included in this integrative review, divided according to the categories found by the content analysis.

Chart 1 – Professional nurse identity and its religious meaning

Category 1: Professional identity of female nurses and its religious meaning.			
Title of the article	Authors / Year	Results	Identity
Sobre a identidade profissional na enfermagem: reconsiderações pontuais acerca da visão filosófica	Carvalho V.(16) 2013	Professional identity was defined based on Nightingalean presuppositions (doctrinaire characteristics, charitable, submissive, and loving). Poor professional performance, with technical and scientific shortcomings.	Religious
Portuguese nursing: history of the life and activism of Maria Augusta Sousa	Almeida DB, Silva GTR, Queirós PJP, Freitas GF, Laitano ADC, Almeida SS, et al.(17) 2016	The political frailty of nursing permeated by a technical formation, with strong religious influences, with relations to gender discussions, that is, the social role of women and their consequent social construction.	Religious
Cuidado: essência da identidade profissional da Enfermagem	Oguisso T, Freitas GF(18) 2016	Nursing as performed nearly exclusively by women. Nurses were easily identified by the head of their garment, one of the items in the clothes of religious women. The care was seen as a domestic activity carried out by women, becoming invisible and socially devalued. Technical and social division of nursing work.	Religious
Vestuário de alunas de uma escola de enfermagem brasileira: relações com a identidade profissional (1947-1965)	Almeida RLM, Aperibense PGGs, Rodrigues AAP, Figueiredo MAG, Santos TCF, Almeida Filho AJ, et al.(19) 2016	The badges in the sleeves of the dresses and on the cap of the female students symbolized identity and hierarchy, in addition to being similar to religious garments. Reproducing behaviors such as zeal and pride of the uniform, which should be used not only as a garment to cover the body, but also as a symbol to be gradually incorporated by nursing students and graduated nurses.	Religious

Source: Created by the authors.

Chart 2 - Intersections between the religious and professional identity of the nurse (continued)

Category 2: Intersections between the religious and professional identity of the nurse			
Title of the article	Authors/Year	Results	Identity
Teorias de enfermagem e modelos que fortalecem a prática profissional	Porto AR, Thofehrn MB, Pai DD, Amoestoy SC, Joner LR, Palma JS(20) 2013	The profession still needs to occupy spaces of power and empower the professionals from the perspective of sociopolitical beings, since they constantly deal with crises of identity due to their theoretical-practical dependence from other professions in the field of health.	Religious x Professional
Contribuição do Projeto HOPE para a configuração da identidade profissional das primeiras enfermeiras alagoanas, de 1973 a 1977	Costa LMC, Santos RM, Santos TCF, Trezza MCSF, Leite JL(21) 2014	A profession that is only auxiliary to the work of physicians, with a highly technical and scientific character, combative when it comes to issues of health policies and the autonomy of the profession.	Religious x Professional
A visão discente sobre a identidade profissional do enfermeiro	Pinto DPSR, Câmara AG, Malveira FAS, Valença CN, Germano RM, Ferreira Júnior MA(22) 2014	Undergraduate students expressed that the main aspects involved in the professional identity of nurses are their capacity to lead, act as educators, having technical and scientific knowledge, being humble, and capable of perceiving the needs and difficulties of others.	Religious x Professional

Chart 2 - Intersections between the religious and professional identity of the nurse (conclusion)

Category 2: Intersections between the religious and professional identity of the nurse			
Title of the article	Authors/Year	Results	Identity
Identidade profissional percebida por acadêmicos de enfermagem: atuação, reconhecimento e valorização	Beck CLC, Prestes FC, Silva RM, Tavares JP, Prochnow A(23) 2014	Difficulties in defining the responsibilities of nurses, segmentation of the profession in categories and a culture that overvalues the medical class.	Religious x Professional
Uniform as a sign of a new nursing identity in Brasil (1923-1931)	Peres MAA, Padilha MICS(24) 2014	The official use of uniforms in the Anna Nery School (EAN), which were worn as symbols, was an important part of the strategy of building a new professional identity. The absence of aprons (which gives domestic features to the work) in the uniform of graduated nurses, whose main symbolic elements are the color white (for hygienic reasons, the replacement of the dark textiles used by the religious was allowed) and the cap (as a symbol of professional nursing).	Religious x Professional
Sistematização da Assistência de Enfermagem e formação da identidade profissional	Gutiérrez MGR, Morais SCR(25) 2017	Scarcity of discussions on its repercussions for the construction of genuine nursing knowledge and, consequently, professional identity, in addition to a limited use of theoretical nursing references that could direct the use of this tool for the presentation of data. The different categories of nursing workers have not been giving credence to the use of the Systematization of Nursing Assistance (SAE) as a directive that can promote the quality of care and professional autonomy.	Religious x Professional

Source: Created by the authors.

Chart 3 - Intersections between the military and religious identity of nurses (continued)

Category 3: Intersections between the military and religious identity of nurses			
Title of the article	Authors/Year	Results	Identity
Rituales patrióticos y religiosos: contribución a la identidad de las enfermeras brasileña y española (1937-1945)	Santos TCF, Oliveira AB, Gomes MLB, Peres MAA, Almeida Filho AJ, Abrão FMS(26) 2013	The participation of women in wars gave birth to military nurses, who acted as voluntaries motivated by the commitment to exercise their profession. The nurse had the qualities of the ideal housewife and the traditional values of submission, dedication, and devotion to the needs of the patient and the physician. Religion also emerged as a justification for the work of the nurse. Considering that, the sacrifice was seen as an essential quality of nurses. The division of labor in nursing also suffered great military influence, since, at this period, the nursing work was divided between those who supervised and those who were directly responsible for the assistance.	Military x Religious

Chart 3 - Intersections between the military and religious identity of nurses

Category 3: Intersections between the military and religious identity of nurses (conclusion)			
Title of the article	Authors/Year	Results	Identity
Sexist stereotypes in portuguese nursing: A historical study in the period 1935 a 1974	Almeida DB, Queirós PJP, Silva GTR, Laitano ADC, Almeida SS(27) 2016	Military nursing and the influence of the armed forces on military nursing (social division of work, with features of voluntary and charity work). Nursing as a feminine field and gender as a social formation (women were directed to carry out actions that were seen as “domestic”, for instance, caring for others). Nursing as nunhood (a moralized practice carried out with diligence, charity, abnegation). Nursing as an auxiliary field of knowledge (its actions disarticulated from a systematic and scientific education).	Military x Religious

Source: Created by the authors.

Discussion

To better understand the categories that emerged from the analysis of the studies included in this integrative review, this discussion will start by addressing the professional identity of the nurse and its religious meaning, since this was the most frequently mentioned.

The religious meaning present in the professional identity of the nurse has its roots in the medieval era. Then, health practices were influenced by political, social and economical determining aspects of feudal societies, including its relations with Christianity. That characterized the first movement of institutionalization of healthcare and its link to priesthood and nunhood. These are the origins of Nursing as an informal practice. It was mostly developed by religious women, leaving behind a legacy that, with time, was legitimized and accepted by society as attributes inherent to female nurses(7,28).

Therefore, submission and obedience were widely addressed in most studies analyzed here, since both are marked features of the religious women who, at the time, were transferred into Nursing duties. As a result, Nursing was perceived as a profession that was hierarchically inferior and, consequently, subordinate to medicine⁽²⁹⁾.

Abnegation, devotion, dedication, the spirit to serve, and obedience were features socially attributed to the work of nurses, with the objective of giving it the features of priesthood, not of a professional practice, since these activities were focused on manual labor and based on empirical knowledge⁽²⁸⁾. Therefore, domestic and popular health actions with intense Christian mystical connotations and feelings of charity were predominant.

It stands out that, even after the professionalization of the field of Nursing, religious characteristics remained. That is because the main precursor of the profession, Florence Nightingale, would emphasize that the field activities of nursing should be understood as both a profession and a vocation. Therefore, both aspects were indissociable⁽³⁰⁾.

Being that so, authors suggest that the propagation of the original ideals according to which Nursing was female and charity-related contributed for the marginalization and lack of recognition of nurses. Thus, these professionals were destitute of social value as professionals, since they were obedient and submissive to the determinations of other health professionals. This situation, as a result, highlighted how unclear the importance of the nurses is for the

actions of the health team, patients, and society as a whole^(29,31).

The convergence between the professional and religious identity of the nurse has its origins in the advent of modern Nursing, which was influenced by the knowledge and practices of Florence Nightingale. At that moment, the professional and specific institutionalized practice started, and earned respect in the field of health. Therefore, it was no longer understood as a simple empirical activity, and started to be recognized as a paid profession, attending to the workforce needs of hospitals. Since then, these professionals started to need to act according to scientific knowledge⁽³²⁾.

However, in the researches analyzed, the professionalization of the Nursing field was discussed as a practice that, despite the fact it brought a scientific approach to the field, was, for a long time, permeated by strong traces of the religious influence over the profession. This could be observed in some of the characteristics that were socially attributed to the nurses and in the features of their uniforms, which were similar to that of religious women⁽²⁴⁾.

It should be mentioned that, at that time, the activities of the nurses were based on the practical dimension of techniques and administrative knowledge. That represented the working process of Nursing in a vertical technical division, a dichotomy that separates their knowledge/know-how according to formation⁽³³⁾.

According to some authors, the Nursing model prescribed by Nightingale (the Nightingalean System) was one of the main reasons the work performed by nurses was unappreciated and vulnerable, since it imposed many demands to the nurses hired. They needed to be single, with no children, and completely submissive to the demands of health institutions and to the orders of physicians. That made it easy for the State and health services to exploit these professionals. According to one of the studies analyzed, this work was similar to that of a slave or a nun⁽¹⁷⁾.

The social and technical division of labor in the field of Nursing generated essential conditions to understand the construction of

the identity of female nurses, since it meant that activities carried out by them were not outlined well, which, frequently, generated a mistaken perception of their activities⁽¹⁷⁾. This aspect was also made clear in another study, which remarked on the difficulty of Nursing students in distinguishing what were the specific activities of the female nurse, mostly associating it to features that are related to religious actions⁽²²⁾.

The studies that address the identity of the nurse as it is associated to religious and military aspects showed that they were recruited to work in the war as voluntaries, motivated by traditional values such as submission, dedication, and devotion to the needs of the patient and the physician, having religion as the justification for this work^(17,26). The main activity carried out in the battlefields was the direct care for wounded soldiers, since this was understood as related to domestic work, and as such, an exclusively female attribution.

In Brazil, in 1914, during the 1st World War, the Red Cross assumed the training of voluntary nurses to aid the wounded in the war⁽²⁸⁾. It should be mentioned that, once adapted to the routine of war and to the adversities of the camps, they could have learnt new cultures and technologies⁽³⁴⁾.

The social division of Nursing labor was also an aspect discussed in the studies. The profession was strongly influenced by military organization, especially by the concept of a command unit that is present in the linear organization and originates from medieval armies⁽³⁵⁾. That partially explains the dichotomy between thinking and doing in Nursing, something intrinsically related to the technical and social division of labor, since intellectual actions were delegated to the so called lady nurses, while manual actions were under the responsibility of nurses⁽²⁸⁾, leading to a lack of appreciation for the healthcare offered by the nurse. In addition, these stereotypes contributed to disseminate the image of Nursing as a practice that is auxiliary to medicine, based on manual and disarticulated actions that derive from systematized and scientific formation⁽²⁸⁾.

Based on the analysis of the many factors related to the construction of the professional identity of the nurse, it can be inferred that the current perception of their identity, when associated to the recognition of the nurses of themselves in said descriptions of identity, contributes to weaken their identities, since the actions attributed to this profession suggest a lack of completeness (the almost being), aspects that directly resonate in the self-perception of these professionals, as well as in their autonomy, personal realization, and in their recognition of Nursing as a profession⁽⁸⁾.

It cannot be denied that the work of Nursing professionals is permeated by social and political processes and exchanges, which, oftentimes, make it difficult to understand the real relevance of these workers, which are often surrounded by technicism and by their occupation of many jobs, in a universe in which poor work conditions are growing. In this context, nurses suffer symbolic violence, while also practicing violence to the job categories below them in routine professional relations⁽⁷⁾.

However, the broad social and economic transformations of contemporaneity imposed many changes in the world of labor, and as a result, in identities. This makes it possible for nurses, as a professional group, to reclaim new identities, that can dialectically transcend the marks of the past⁽³⁶⁾.

To this end, nurses must have more critical and reflexive actions when it comes to the exercise of their profession, so that they can assume an actively engaged posture in the fight for better work conditions. It stands out that, if this does not happen, the future of the Nurse will be an even more intense decrease in the wages of the workforce, accompanied by its proletarianization, leading to even more political and critical weakness of these professionals⁽³⁷⁾.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the professional identity of the nurse is strongly related to religious issues, has been influenced by military

organization, and presents signs that show its objective of being recognized as a profession and a science. Also, it is still permeated by aspects related to the social and historical construction of the profession (gender, submission, and lack of professional appreciation).

Therefore, it is extremely important to promote discussions regarding the professional identity of the nurse in the spaces for professional formation and activity, which will contribute to build and consolidate an identity that can actually boost the social recognition and professional appreciation of the nurse.

These discussions can also favor the understanding of a Nurse's working process and object of work, while also restating and consolidating the main role nurse has in relation to other professional categories in the field of health. A result of this would be professional engagement, including the political dimension of the profession, to offer a more humane, political, and ethical healthcare.

Collaborations:

1. conception, design, analysis, and interpretation of data: Shirlene Cerqueira dos Santos and Deybson Borba de Almeida;

2. writing of the article and relevant critical review of the intellectual content: Gilberto Tadeu Reis da Silva, Glêcia Carvalho Santana, Hudson Soares da Silva and Laiane Silva Santana;

3. final approval of the version to be published: Shirlene Cerqueira dos Santos and Deybson Borba de Almeida.

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