



FLORENCE 2020



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON THE HISTORY OF NURSING

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS



Florence, **Italy**

13 • 15 February **2020**

CSF Montedomini
"Il Fuligno"

Via Faenza, 48

Palazzo
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International Conference on the History of Nursing

13-15th February 2020

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Portuguese Nursing between 1910 and 1933 – The Construction of a Professional Identity

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Throughout time, society has associated contradictory representations of nurses and nursing, which persist in the individual and collective imaginary. Social representations are part of a memory, more or less distant, and may have an historical, social and cultural justification.

Therefore, we defined as the **main goal** of our study to reveal how social representations associated with nurses and nursing appeared in the past seeking the path of our professional identity.

The temporal limits of the study are between 1st Republic beginning (1910) and the promulgation of the Constitution, establishing the political principles, which defined “Estado Novo” (1933).

The research developed according the following guidelines:

1. Identification of sociopolitical, cultural and sanitary context (facts only make sense in their relation with various factors)
2. Identification of legal diplomas concerning the profession (legal diplomas reflects the needs and problems of a society and the ideology that sustained its construction)
3. Identification of the representations related to nurses and nursing

To answer the questions of each topic, we used: 1) Generalist daily press to identify news related with nurses and nursing (“Diário de Notícias, the most sold newspaper at the time); 2) Legislative documents and 3) minutes of parliamentary debates.

Conceptual assumptions of discourse analysis and specifically the concept of interpretative repertoire were the base to analyse documents *corpus*.

Before we mention the findings (interpretative repertoires) must refer some Portugal characteristics at that time.

On the morning of the 5th October (after 700 years of Monarchy) the Republic “found” a country financially exhausted, with an illiterate population, rural, and poor, with a significant rate of emigration and also migration to big cities (at the time Lisbon and Porto) looking for a better life. The republican ideals bring hope of a society built on justice, progress and science, where women and men, citizens, were educated, responsible, vigorous and patriots.

But the sixteen years 1st Republic lasted were marked by political instability, opposition movements to the new regime, popular rebellions and, most of all, by the 1st World War that make even harder the living conditions of Portuguese people and brought increase prices and difficulties on food supplies and stuff. Constant instability support a dictatorial solution that occurs on the 28th may 1926, after a military coup.

Between 1926 and 1933 the instability remains; from 1928 onwards, Salazar, first as finance minister and after as prime minister, defined the ideological and political assumptions of “Estado Novo”, the fascist regime that will remain 48 years.

During the 23 years, studied, Portugal regularly experienced epidemic outbreaks of smallpox, typhoid, and cholera. Scabies and rabies were a constant. Tuberculosis never stopped increasing on a population with severe food shortages and bad hygiene habits. Child mortality reached rates of 130/1000. Hospital care conditions were precarious due to deficit budgets; too much seek people, and building and equipment degradation.

The result of analysis done to the documents we gathered, allow us to identify patterns of language that define **five interpretative repertoires** used to describe nurses and nursing.

1. NURSE AS A MAID AND NURSING AS A FEMININE OCCUPATION

Several discursive excerpts point out the association between nursing and housework and the role of woman at home. Found words like servant, housekeeper, chaperone and expressions like “knows everything about housework” mainly on advertising asking for or offering nursing services. Some characteristics, associated to feminine figure, are point out such as be loving, be clean, to know how to rule a house.

Nursing is associated with the role of a woman at home, is a feminine occupation that could be done by humble and less educated people. Concerning personnel who work at hospitals we identified a discourse that devalue nurses considering them uneducated, bad character persons, capable of stealing, and mistreatment patients, without the qualities related to a good nurse such as knowledge, discipline, affection and devotion. This rationale was used to defend the presence of religious nurses at the hospitals and later to defend the exit of nurses from army after 1st World War.

Nevertheless, we also identified an opposite discourse that points out the effort and self-denial of nurses that works in inhumane conditions with such low incomes that were not enough to daily needs. Mainly physicians produced such discourse claiming for better salary and education for nurses thus persons with the moral qualities demanded by the profession could practice it.

2. THE ENHANCEMENT OF NURSES AND NURSING IN THE CONTEXT OF REVOLUTIONARY FIGHTS AND 1ST WORLD WAR

Several discursive excerpts referring nurses and nursing under rebellions occurring in the country and under 1st World War. The news that describes such situations praises the work and qualities showed by nurses.



The effort, self-denial, care, devotion and affection showed by nurses while treating the wounded is highlighted. Professional conscience is pointed out since nurses' runs to the hospital even being off to help the treatment. It is the 1st World War that brought to light nurses.

Portuguese Red Cross and a feminine movement created at the time "The Portuguese Women Crusade" led the effort of organizing a nurse corps well prepared to work both in Portugal and in France. Concepts such as patriotic duty and humanitarian mission were the base to the call done to Portuguese women to sign up the *war nursing courses*. At the same time, characteristics so called feminine, were highlighted such as kindness, devotion, affection, patience and compassion. A strict moral behavior was imperative. It became a profession approved by a diploma.

3. THE ENHANCEMENT OF NURSES IN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR INTERVENCIONS

After the war became evident the relation between poor living conditions and the onset of certain diseases. It is underlined the importance of prevention and the need of educated professionals. Appears texts where nurses were referred as the indispensable collaborator of doctors with an education role. Their education and personal qualities allows them to be agents in changing people's behaviors towards diseases. The role of nurses on community underline the need of educated visiting nurses like on civilized countries.

4. THE ENHANCEMENT OF NURSING IN THE CONTEXT OF LEGISLATIVE BODY

The legislative documents we found show a continuous concern on valuing the profession throughout reformulation of admission criteria both to school nursing and to hospital.

Although there was, a "Professional School of Nurses" since 1901 at Hospital S. José (the biggest in Portugal and in Lisbon) nurses training was not so good: there were no skills examinations to candidates; the only demand to candidates was to know how to read, write and count. Anyone could be admitted as a nurse.

In 1918, a law defined the reorganization of Public Hospitals in Lisbon and of the "Professional School of Nursing". In newspaper we can read nurse staff, admission criteria, rules of promotion that depend from now on of public examination, moral suitability and proof of skills. From 1918 on, we identify on legislative documents an increasing demand: for better academic qualifications; for defining skills criteria and moral suitability both to admission and to career development and for good behavior as a requirement to access to nurse staff.

Nevertheless, in the hospitals, continue to work, as nurses, people that had no diploma and, per some testimonies, of doubtful behavior, despite all legislative effort.

5. THE ENHANCEMENT OF NURSING IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATIONAL TRAINING – the presence of professional nursing school on the newspaper

Nursing school had a regular place on newspaper, referring, most of all, formal sitting when school opened, the beginning of school year and distribution of prizes to students. The ambience, the speeches and the individualities present were described in detail.

Therefore, nursing education is showed as rigorous and demanding; students were engaged and qualified therefore they were awarded. The transcription of speeches shows the compliments done to students by their teachers ensuring their competence.

We point out as **conclusions**:

- Nurses and nursing were visible on newspapers, legislative documents and parliamentary sessions;
- Republican ideals brought laic nursing to light; beliefs in the value of science compelled nursing to become a socially valued profession with skilled professionals and irreproachable behavior;
- 1st World War was a turning point in Portuguese nursing - from 1918 onwards legislative production proposes profession regulation and a higher demand for its education;
- In 23 years, nursing passed from a profession practiced by undifferentiated personnel to a profession that need a diploma obtained in legally recognized schools. Nurses passed from "maids" to qualified professionals;
- Nursing became a feminine profession and gained a communitarian side, needed for the struggle for better sanitary conditions in the country;

We believe this work can add to the reconfiguration of our past. The recovery of memory gives us cohesion and a sense of belonging to a professional group enabling us to build our professional identity.

History is a path that always begins with a curiosity, a question. Answer that question like "What happened?" and "Why it happened?" allow us to understand the making and transformation of societies over time giving social groups a sense of identity and permanence. With no memory, we simply do not exist!

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