

 Original article

CHARACTERIZATION OF THE AUTHORITY EXERCISED BY NURSE-MANAGERS IN HEALTH INSTITUTIONS IN MEXICO AND PORTUGAL

Danelia Gómez-Torres¹, Livia Quiroz-Benhumea², María Sandra Davila-Villada³, Elizabeth Bernardino⁴

ABSTRACT: The study aimed to analyze the meaning of the authority exercised by the nurse-manager in health institutions and to compare the type of authority of nurse-managers in Mexico and in Portugal. This study is qualitative, descriptive and comparative. A total of 24 nurse-managers participated. The instrument used was an interview script, based in the following dimensions: meaning and type of authority. The meaning of authority was discussed in accordance with the theory of symbolic interactionism. The results made it possible to reflect on the meaning of authority, revealing that – for the Mexican managers – it is a moral value on the part of the manager; while for the Portuguese, it is a skill which is inherent to the position. Regarding the type of authority exercised, for the former, justice, comprehension and equality in relation to the other employees predominated. For the latter, the authority must be democratic, participative and based on acceptance. It is concluded that among the managers from both countries there is no confluence regarding authority, and that their divergence affects the final perspective of their decisions.

DESCRIPTORS: Management; Nursing; Health institutions; Hospital directors.

CARACTERIZAÇÃO DA AUTORIDADE QUE ENFERMEIRAS GERENTES EXERCEM EM INSTITUIÇÕES DE SAÚDE NO MÉXICO E EM PORTUGAL

RESUMO: Foram objetivos do estudo analisar o significado da autoridade exercida pela enfermeira gerente em instituições de saúde e comparar o tipo de autoridade de dirigentes de enfermagem no México e em Portugal. Pesquisa qualitativa, descritiva e comparativa, da qual participaram 24 gerentes de enfermagem. O instrumento utilizado foi o de roteiro de entrevista, com base nas dimensões: significado e tipo de autoridade. Discutiu-se o significado de autoridade de acordo com a teoria do interacionismo simbólico. Os resultados possibilitaram refletir sobre o significado de autoridade, revelando-se que, para as gerentes mexicanas, é um valor moral do gestor e, para os portugueses, uma competência inerente à posição. No que concerne ao tipo de autoridade exercida, para as primeiras predominou justiça, compreensão e igualdade em relação aos demais. Para os segundos, esta deve ser democrática, participativa e de aceitação. Conclui-se que não há confluência sobre a autoridade entre gerentes de ambos os países e que sua divergência incide na perspectiva final de suas decisões.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Gerência; Enfermagem; Instituições de saúde; Diretores de hospitais.

CARACTERÍSTICACIÓN DE LA AUTORIDAD EJERCIDA POR ENFERMERAS GERENTES DE INSTITUCIONES DE SALUD EN MÉXICO-PORTUGAL

RESUMEN: Los objetivos son analizar el significado de autoridad que ejerce la enfermera gerente en instituciones de salud y comparar el tipo de autoridad ejecutada por dirigentes de enfermería en México y Portugal. Investigación cualitativa, descriptiva y comparativa, participaron 24 gerentes de enfermería, el instrumento fue una guía de entrevista, basada en las dimensiones: significado y tipo de autoridad, se discutió el significado de autoridad según teoría de interaccionismo simbólico. Los resultados permitieron reflejar el significado de autoridad; para las gerentes mexicanas es un valor moral del dirigente y para los portugueses una competencia en función de la posición designada; respecto al tipo de autoridad que ejercen, en las primeras predominó, justicia, comprensión e igualdad hacia los demás, para los segundos democrática participativa y aceptación. Concluyéndose que no existe la misma dimensión de autoridad entre gerentes de ambos países, su divergencia radica en la perspectiva final de sus decisiones.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Gerencia; Enfermería; Instituciones de salud; Directores de hospitales.

¹RN. Ph.D in Nursing. Lecturer of the Faculty of Nursing and Obstetrics, of the Autonomous University of Mexico State. Toluca, State of Mexico, Mexico.

²RN. Undertaking Master's degree in Gerontology. Faculty of Nursing and Obstetrics, Autonomous University of Mexico State. Toluca, State of Mexico, Mexico.

³RN. Licensed in Nursing by the Faculty of Nursing and Obstetrics, Autonomous University of Mexico State. Toluca, State of Mexico, Mexico.

⁴RN. Ph.D in Nursing. Lecturer of the Federal University of Paraná. Curitiba, State of Paraná (PR), Brazil.

Corresponding author:

Danelia Gómez-Torres

Universidad Autónoma de Estado de México

Rua Bolívia, 4 -52169 - Metepec, Estado de México, México

E- mail: gomezdanelia@usa.net

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● INTRODUCTION

The authority that nurses exercise in managerial administration and in continuing education has a major impact on their work nowadays. The commitment and motivation are factors which make up the main characteristic of the practice of nursing. In this context, the level of authority is significantly related to the academic skills that the managers have acquired over the course of their professional development, as well as those arising from their trajectory, depending on their professional history in the area of management in general and of authority in particular.

Authority, as such, is closely associated with the power to obtain changes, to inspire behaviors which make it possible to interact collectively, to favor growth and the development of the discipline. In this regard, the subject's individuality may appear to be a characteristic of the managerial function⁽¹⁾. During her professional work, this becomes a platform for the managerial practice, which makes it possible for the nurse to undertake activities related to the managerial function in health institutions. There are, however, environments which allow activities which may be represented symbolically, as is the case in Portugal, where this is mainly undertaken by men – in contrast with what happens in Mexico, where it is commonly exclusively undertaken by women. Allied with this representation, there is the fact that Nursing worldwide is practiced by a higher percentage of women, a reason for which, in this article, the types of authority described by the professionals from both countries differ.

Answering the question “What is the meaning of authority for the nurse-manager?”, as well as identifying the meaning of the authority of the nurse in the institutional health organization, reflecting on the distinct perceptions in relation to the type of authority of the nurse-manager, can contribute to basic fundamentals in the performance of the managerial role. These fundamentals can be applied both to the discipline and to the science, being related to the study object: the meaning of the type of authority projected by the nurse-manager in the hospital environment.

Symbolic interactionism (SI) was used as the theoretical basis related to the meaning of the central concept. As a result, it is understood that it relates to activities which are constructed through the interaction between the individuals. Once these actions have been defined, they appear in the social environment in which these are inserted⁽²⁾. The theory considers that the social reality which develops based on the interaction of some people with others – between human beings – is mediated by the use of symbols or the interpretation of meanings regarding others' actions. In the interactionist approach, human behavior is not a question of mere responses to the activities of peers, but involves a response to the intentions of these. On the other hand, human society is founded on the consensus of shared meanings, regarding the way of understanding, and common expectations. Interactionism attributes great importance to the meaning that things have in relation to human behavior, as well as understanding it as the result of the interactive process established between people. In this perspective, interactionism emphasizes the meaning of the things which are difficult to interpret, given that the individual's behavior is self-directed in the symbolic environment, allowing the understanding of the meaning which is constructed based on the interactions which are established in a single society. SI theory is one of the ways of interpreting peoples' perceptions, the meaning and sense that these give to things, and how these reports relate to peoples' experiences.

As a theoretical tool, symbolic interactionism makes it possible to understand a phenomenon in a broader sense, making it possible to understand if this meaning is recurrent or resultant. Through this methodology, it is possible to instrumentalize the interview technique. According to the methodological considerations of SI⁽³⁾, procedures such as the following are used: case studies, interviews, participant observation, life history and analysis of documents, letters and diaries, among others, given that one of its characteristics is to understand social life as the result of the actors' interactions. Its principal criteria indicate the importance of the environment as symbolic, the meanings and the intentionalities⁽³⁾ being conferred to the subjects. On the other hand, the relevancy is conferred to the meaning which the things present for the individuals and through the fact that the signification is attributed to an interactive relationship.

The methodological considerations of SI⁽⁴⁾ as a method have a sequence. Hence, the first step is exploration, considering this to be the initial approximation with any context intended to be studied and which is initially unknown, in which the purpose is to have a starting point so as to arrive at a clear

understanding of the problem to be detected, identifying important relationship lines. As a result, the researcher's conceptual tools are allowed to evolve in the light of what this learns regarding the life which is studied.

The second step is the inspection, which indicates the theoretical development, that is, it is an issue of explaining the relationships and clarifying the concepts. The aim is to examine the empirical content, approaching the material from different angles, formulating various questions regarding this, and arriving at a new valuation which arises based on such questions. In this way, one must presume that the only way of knowing human beings and groups and detecting their interactions is naturalistic research⁽⁵⁾. In this sense, interactionist theory's harmony with the study object can be perceived, as this proposes to find the meaning which authority presents for the nurse-manager.

● METHOD

Research with a qualitative focus, whose method explores an experience, culture or situation in depth, considering the context and complexity⁽⁴⁾ at a descriptive level, given that it aims to specify the important properties and characteristics of the people who are the study object. In addition to this, it is comparative, as it considers the perspectives of the Mexican and Portuguese nurses.

The environments in which the study was undertaken were the health institutions where the people involved worked: Mexico City, and the State of Mexico, and the Portuguese territory. The social actors considered for this study were the nurse-managers in hospitals occupying senior positions in the healthcare institutions. The inclusion criteria were: to be a nurse, and – during the study – to exercise the role of directors and deputy directors of third-level institutions or national managers for over two years. Instrument: a semistructured interview script with 11 questions, produced based on guiding questions, in their turn, disconnected from the objectives. The administration of the questions was undertaken in the participants' work centers: they were later collected without excluding any interview in either group. Data saturation was obtained: with 11 in Portugal, and 13 in Mexico, making it possible to answer the research question and achieve the study objectives so as – in this way – to produce a contrast between the perception and the meaning of managerial authority.

Firstly, the researchers proceeded to exploration, through which they arrived at an approximation of the issue of authority in the two countries. In this, the aim was to define the different approaches, from previous managers, to the current time, integrating a contextual characteristic. In associating the information, the structures of relevance of the theoretical material were grasped⁽¹⁾. Once this activity had been finalized, it was possible to identify the two thematic axes which stood out most, as well as the important relationships, so as to understand the problem. This was undertaken between January and June 2015 in both countries.

The second step was to proceed to inspection through repeated, exhaustive and critical reading of the empirical content, through which it was possible to grasp and concentrate the concepts which stood out the most, so as to be able to select the important data. This was undertaken through chromatic technique, bringing together the data in a matrix so as to establish a relationship between concepts and by the categories of each theme, concentrating the contributions of this analysis, which was the product of reflective acts in different angles.

In order to discuss the results, after undertaking the systematic analysis and the interpretation of the information, what was most representative was selected, considering what had appeared. In this way, these results were discussed, contrasting the empirical material with the theoretical framework of SI and obtaining the meaning of the authority which the nurse-managers exercise in the two scenarios. The results were established following the proposal to respond to the study objectives⁽⁵⁾. It begins by presenting the responses of the meaning of authority through tables, in a comparative form. Following that, discussion is undertaken by categories, using as central axes the activities undertaken by the managers in both countries, principally so as to value that which each one presents, with the aim of improving what is related to management. It is important to emphasize that this study aimed to comparatively analyze the data collected, without claiming to judge whether the types of authority are appropriate or not. As a result, the aim was to ascertain the variables found⁽⁶⁾ which were common or divergent.

Ethical aspects of the study. In order to comply with international policies, regulations and legal provisions, which aim to protect the participants' integrity, rights and well-being, in accordance with decree 227-10/2014, the approved research protocol was sent to the Research Ethics Committee of the Escola Superior de Enfermagem de Coimbra (Nursing School of Coimbra). Because the study involved people, this must be undertaken in conformity with legislation; because of this, the interviewees were asked to sign the consent document in order to participate⁽⁷⁾. As these complied with the study characteristics, these were informed that, in order to maintain their anonymity, they would be referred to using a letter and a number. The main researcher committed herself to maintaining the study subjects' confidentiality and to limiting access to the specific data for up to five years, preventing consultation of these data by any person outside the study. Finally, due to its characteristics of objectivity and impartiality, this is considered to be of lower risk, given that, in using the interviews, no financial, employment-related or professional conflict was ascertained.

● RESULTS

The results derived from two axes. The first aimed to obtain the meaning of authority for the nurse-managers in general, in the perspective of symbolic interactionism; the second relates to the type of authority that these exercise in their managerial positions within the health institutions. The discoveries can be verified comparatively in order to determine similarities or differences between the groups involved. The results derived from the singularities which the social actors present, such as being from different countries. One of the notable data was gender: regarding the Mexican examples, there was a total of 13 women. In relation to the Portuguese, on the other hand, the majority were male – eight out of 11. Another relevant aspect was that, through the interviews, data saturation was obtained. It was deduced that this was due to the participants' high educational level.

It is emphasized that the management process exercised by the nurse-managers has distinct components. One of these is that authority, generally speaking, is conceptualized as a post occupied by a person whom one should obey or respect. However, it is created and maintained by public opinion, also being conditioned by feelings, affects, respect or pessimism; including when the authority relies on simple physical cohesion accepted by the subordinates. These characteristics are reflected in the results of the social act, and may be observed in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 – Comparison of the meaning of authority in the perspective of nurse-managers from various entities in Mexico and Portugal. Toluca, State of Mexico, Mexico, 2016

| Category | Mexico | Portugal |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Meaning of authority | <p><i>That figure, with well-established moral premises, with human and ethical aspects related to their personal and professional development and trajectory developed throughout their whole life. (M6)</i></p> <p><i>The respect, the discipline, the knowledge, the line of work and the responsibility in general. (M4)</i></p> <p><i>The degree of influence which the person has over the staff, as well as over areas related to the work. (E2)</i></p> | <p><i>It is a skill which allows us to lead a team and management which allows us to lead a process effectively. (P1)</i></p> <p><i>It means the capacity to decide on and implement projects, planning, monitoring and control of situations. (P2)</i></p> <p><i>It is to make effective use of the strength of your position, so that your aims can be achieved [...] establishing this authority with those which are the knowledges of the profession, the skills acquired and including through what was taught and established to me. (P7)</i></p> |

In accordance with what was mentioned above, the manager's authority may be revealed through an appreciation, from which it is possible to infer her relationship with the subordinates within the organizational structure. The following are incorporated in this: knowledge and discipline; and moral, ethical and humanistic values, among others. This interpretive social characteristic considers that, for human beings, the meanings are an element which exists in joint actions. And, in order to explain peoples' behavior, it is necessary for the meaning of things to derive from the social interaction between manager and subordinates. In the same way, those managers who have direct contact with

the contributors understand there to be basic principles which must be observed in order to ensure that all may be motivated to carry out their functions in the health institution. It is therefore considered that authority is not a quality which is awarded, but which is acquired. It is, therefore, the product of interaction within a social group, this being a fully identified value.

Table 2 – Comparison of the type of authority in the perspective of nurse-managers from various entities in Mexico and Portugal. Toluca, State of Mexico, Mexico, 2016

| Category | Mexico | Portugal |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Type of authority | <p><i>I am sensitive, and I like always to treat my colleagues with tenderness, to have physical contact through giving a hug, holding their hands; my way is to treat people the same, with my superiors and the authorities as far as is possible. (M4)</i></p> <p><i>An authority who comprehends and understands the person can encourage productivity, but I'm one of those people who understands that human beings are more important than results. (M8)</i></p> <p><i>It is necessary to work, to be present, with moral and formal authority, through this commitment and through responsibilities. (M5)</i></p> | <p><i>I make use of a global management, as an open model, in which people are relevant, making it possible to integrate the contributions and the intervention from other areas.(P2)</i></p> <p><i>A position of authority, but I also do whatever is possible such that it may be an authority which is accepted through peoples' understanding and participation.(P5)</i></p> <p><i>A democratic and participative authority [...]</i></p> <p><i>The type of authority that I exercise is facilitative within the democratic prism in which all can and must participate [...] Naturally, there are some situations of authoritarianism or position of this authority exercised.(P6)</i></p> |

According to the results, there are different guidelines to attribute meanings to the authority, such as: it being an instinctive impulse, charisma, and political instrument. As a consequence, this concept is linked to the causes of peoples' behavior and becomes a product of the social interaction.

● DISCUSSION

Authority is based on a rational act based in freedom, seen as a dynamic process arising from the internal experience which is constructed socially⁽⁸⁾, being recognized by others and projecting that the person (manager) is better prepared, has better capacity for judgment and has specialized in everything related to management. As symbolic interactionism (SI) establishes, this notion which goes from within to without is an individual experience which becomes a social act⁽⁹⁾. In this context, the meaning of authority is extracted from the conception that the manager presents regarding her interaction with the subjects.

These managers' perspective is related to authority linked to work with justice and a moral quality, among other aspects. It is expected that the authority may be obeyed without coercion, that is, that the manager who takes on this role receives a legitimate obedience⁽¹⁰⁾. In a certain way, these discoveries established that the managerial power in the organizations helps to identify and understand the life of the institutions and the context of each one of them.

According to one of the premises of symbolic interactionism, meaning derives from the social interaction that each individual maintains with the other⁽¹¹⁾. And this interaction occurs through symbolic communication, obtaining – through language – other significant symbols.

The analysis of nurses' opinions regarding the meaning of authority in the managerial intervention leads us to identify the significant symbols or processes of mental behavior, which are fundamental in the nursing professionals, in their position as managers and in their work routine⁽¹²⁾. In relation to the Mexican nurses' impressions, authority represents a value generated through the moral recognition as a directive, validated by their collaborators or subordinates, taking into account the humanistic, ethical and professional aspects, which are the result of a life trajectory. For the Portuguese nurses, authority is related to the capacity or competence, and results from a stance for developing projects and processes. The premise of symbolic interactionism is that the meaning of such things appears from

a social interaction that the person presents with her peers; that is, with managers of the same level.

Type of authority: it is surmised from the study that, in Mexican health organizations, the nurses who exercise management call attention to a balance between the power-respect binomial; which is certainly manifested when the authority taken on is inclined to morality, justice, understanding and equality regarding others. That is to say, the nurse-managers identify with their collaborators in defending their convictions in their social context; in addition to this, they give visibility to ways of acting through adopting stances which are more comprehensive, just and humane. Such a posture potentializes the subordinates' freedom, seeking to overcome the constructive relationships and, at the same time, avoiding authoritarianism and oppression⁽¹²⁾. In contrast, the type of authority that the Portuguese managers exercise is democratic and participative, based on consensus and acceptance. This is because they identify with the others, and involve themselves in the construction of new ways of interacting, with attitudes which are more interactive and facilitative. In this way, and considering that the authority of nursing needs to be conceived and exercised in a reflexive perspective regarding the managerial practice, and contrasting the concepts of symbolic interactionism, we find ourselves facing a self-reflexive behavior of the managers as people in a process of social interaction, given that, at the same time, they are committed to the democratic practices with the workers. In the exercising of her profession, the nurse-manager not only lists the practices of control, hierarchy, order and impersonality, but also reflects on the work process: dialogue, participation, in conjunction with her own team, as well as with a multiprofessional team⁽¹²⁾.

● FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study demonstrated that the meaning of authority lies in the way that this is dimensioned, through making visible its representation and social interaction according to the environment in which the manager works. In relation to the Mexican managers, it was based in the being of the manager (morality). For the Portuguese, on the other hand, it was centered in knowledge (their skill); as a consequence, the same dimension of authority does not exist between managers from both countries. Its biggest divergence is based on the final perspective of its decisions. Hence, for the former, the citizen is not seen as the central point of the managerial intervention; and for the latter, it is oriented towards the well-being of the citizen.

In this way, it is possible to infer that the authority exercised by the nurse-managers is a sensitive intervention. This study contributes, therefore, to the guidance of this management-authority practice, which must be situated close to the focal point: the user of the health services. As a result, the high-level managers must act politically, so as to acquire and maintain an authority which supports the population.

It was also evidenced that the participants' gender is relevant to the exercising of authority, given that the model which they exercise indicates that how the manager works results from their maturity, academic level and how long they have worked in managerial practice, as well as the natural essence of man-woman. It is also relevant to ascertain the different scenarios regarding the managerial practice, regarding the authority in the context of work itself, where the paradigm which prevails is centered in the humanistic plane with its specific generic characteristics.

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