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## Researching nursing history in Brazil: what do we have to say?

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### ABSTRACT

The reflection we propose is related to what we write, record and narrate in the approach to the history of nursing, adopting methods and techniques in the construction of studies, whose documentary selection can be written, imaginary, oral, an object, among many others. This implies the construction of assertions understood as “absolute” truths, and which reproduce certain symbolic beliefs in terms of what we want to believe.

**Descriptors:** Nursing; History; Nursing History; Historiography.

The sense of researching history lies in the deconstruction of established beliefs and myths, leading the researcher to progress in terms of knowledge, although there is still much to do in this regard. To think of this perspective is to understand the past as the invention of the present<sup>(1)</sup>, so histo-

rical research is narrated by an approximation of what has happened in the past, and it is necessary to consider the intentions of documentary records such as oral testimonies, since memory is selective<sup>(2)</sup>.

In terms of this understanding, the memory remembrances and forgetfulness, which implies the

choices of what one wishes to remember and/or to forget<sup>(2)</sup>. In other words, the production of meaning takes place, and with it the production of knowledge; however, it is up to us to discern when we make assertions as “absolute” truths. An example of this is when the subject being researched is in front of an image, through which he can take a:

“...free trip, because absorbed in the evocation of the present of images that are not from there, but are exposed there, led to the eyes that observe them. And in this freedom of the trip, the processes that form the experience of the subject are also combined with the imaginary, or game of subterranean fantasies of memory<sup>(3:71)</sup>.”

The past is a “permanent dimension of human consciousness,” and it is a challenge for the researcher to analyze his nature in the “sense of the past<sup>(4:22)</sup>”. This ratifies that historical studies are the results of the approximation of what happened in the past, through documents, methods and techniques that can produce another version and interpretation of that which has been established.

Research in the field of history requires skill in terms of the application of techniques and methods, document selection, triangulation of sources, application of theoretical references and, mainly, of the researcher’s repertoire with regard to the investigated object, given that the result is in the field of possibilities for a credible narrative of the past.

In terms of this line of thought, it is not just a matter of importing and reproducing methods, theories of history or preset recipes with the purpose of the human coming to understand the historicity of nursing; it is necessary to go further.

In order to go further, we believe that we have the support of the realms of history<sup>(5)</sup>, when the professional historians organize their studies in women’s history, health history, war history, and so

on, to activate historical consciousness. In nursing, we lack a similar organization in the field of history.

However, in order to avoid any slippage on the aforementioned assertion, we can highlight the essay associated with of three thematic axes, structured as a result of the First Ibero-American Symposium on the History of Nursing in 2009<sup>(6)</sup>, namely: Anthropology of Care, History of Institutions and Life History.

The first, the Anthropology of Care, also known as the Culture of Care<sup>(7)</sup>, is intended to understand reflection on ideas, actions and circumstances. These are theoretical aspects related to the practice and situations in the process of health needs, which are aimed at ensuring the integrity and harmony of each and every one of the stages that make up human life. Thus, a study involving a culture of care approach aims to identify variants in the form of the satisfaction of needs, and to explain the causes of diversity and their corresponding meanings. Therefore, it is considered essential in the set of patents and latent behaviors developed in the field of health, and involved in the process of satisfying needs, and it is incumbent on us to study its mechanism in view of the different contexts<sup>(6)</sup>.

The second axis is aimed at the History of Institutions and/or the trajectory of teaching, and of nursing assistance and associations, by bringing together the social movements considered in the scope of vocational training. It evokes the memory of the spaces of formation and work, being the thematic axis bringing together the investigations carried out by several researchers and research groups<sup>(6)</sup>.

The third axis focuses on the History of Life, when the biographies and individual memories of illustrious or anonymous individuals become the focus and, through them, aim at creating a version and allowing an interpretation of the development of the profession and the care rendered<sup>(6)</sup>.

These thematic axes could be one of the strategies of organization of the studies in nursing

history, since they lead to understandings and possibilities. They can also guide the construction of historical knowledge in its various versions and interpretations, considering the plurality and the transversal aspect associated to areas of knowledge in nursing and health.

Based on the catalog of the Center for Nursing Studies and Research of the Brazilian Nursing Association, it can be seen that the production of nursing history corresponds to 2.4% of the total production of *Stricto Sensu* Postgraduate work in Brazil, between 1988 and 2011<sup>(8)</sup> and of 9.4% in the period from 1979 to 2013<sup>(9)</sup>.

Considering the interest of researchers in the History of Nursing, these results are the tip of an iceberg, which deserves investment in the search of articles in journals, the identification of the impact factor, among other variants, to better position the "knowledge area". This expression in quotation marks is due to its non-appearance in the organization of areas of knowledge by the Coordination of Improvement of Higher Education and the National Council of Scientific Development, because it does not target the direct effects/impacts on the clientele in health services.

To think that the historical approach does not address the effects/impacts on health services means, directly and/or indirectly, a denial of the past. It is not to understand the lessons of the past, but rather to believe that the beginning occurs here and now, as if the process of discoveries, inventions, and innovations in the trajectory of humanity did not exist. Therefore, dialoguing with the past is not simply about recording what happened through verisimilitude, but rather pointing out the strategies applied to advances in the present due to historical consciousness.

Research in history is to ascertain phenomena, according to established results, in the direction of confirmation or refutation, through the historiographic debate, when aiming at new versions and interpretations with a view to advancing in terms

of knowledge. This means that studies of the past need to meet current demands, but they also have relevance for the construction of new objects.

We can cite, for example, the work of Waleska Paixão, *Pages of the History of Nursing* (1952) and the five reprints entitled *Nursing History*, as one of the bases for new objects, which makes progress in the construction of knowledge, as we acknowledge it is a classic or best seller in terms of the construction of nursing knowledge<sup>(10)</sup>.

Another argument that we can reflect on is care as an object of study for nursing. When investigated the culture of care, it is revealing in that it shows how we deliver such care, and how we provide care to patients/clients over time.

The approach to the culture of care for nursing knowledge areas is relevant, and shows facts/events that are not just new challenges to be faced in our times. They can be found in articles, dissertations, theses, chapters and books, as well as on websites and on social networks, nationally and internationally.

An example of the above is the articles published in the journal *Cultura de los Cuidados*, *History Review*, a publication of the North American Association of Nursing History; in the book *Culture of Care for Newborns*<sup>(11)</sup>; in the papers of *Enfermería Avanza* (<http://enfeps.blogspot.com.br/>) and in the traces and tracks of the past, as possible objects, by the posts in social networks such as Facebook: *Florence Nightingale Instituut*, National Association of History of Nursing, *LACUIDEN*, among many others. These are some examples that act as strategies to broaden the field of vision in nursing history research, by bringing evidence and indications of the development or not, of care over time.

Another possibility is to search the manuals on care that have guided nursing in previous periods, when Brazilian nurses became authors of books; in the patient/client records of times gone by; in the publications of newspapers and magazines of yesteryear, when the population was made to

believe in certain behaviors in the campaigns for public health.

The axis of the History of the Institutions is predominant through a sampling test<sup>(6)</sup>. This can be explained, for example, through the research entitled Contribution of Historical Studies on Nursing Schools to the memory and identity of the profession: an integrative review<sup>(12)</sup>, when the authors suggest to readers "...that the researchers in the area of nursing history reinforce the need to research their schools of origin"<sup>(12:112)</sup>.

The suggestion of the authors points to a delicate and, at the same time, crucial question, since it needs to promote the historiographic debate, which can lead to:

(...) parochial quarrels and problems of institutional self-esteem or deteriorated institutional identities, with or without reason... with excessive preoccupations with the "primatial origins" or historical primacies of this or that institution of education in the field<sup>(13:204)</sup>.

This excerpt was taken from the study entitled "Any Other": a reflection on nursing stories<sup>(13)</sup>, which we understand as an alert. However, for the editors of the periodical in which the publication took place, the footnote reads: "The views expressed in the present reflection do not necessarily reflect the positions of the journal or of the members of its Editorial Board"<sup>(13:201)</sup>. This points to how external criticism is not welcome, what should be seen with other eyes.

The promotion of the historiographical debate, besides the integrative revision, is the possibility of advancement in terms of knowledge. In this sense, it is up to the researcher to compare the arguments and documentation used in each investigation to progress in writing the history of nursing, as well as in terms of integrative reviews. This implies that researchers in Nursing History

need to mature in research and be bolder in order to achieve results that lead to propositions that aim at the critical and reflective perspective of what we do through the lens of the past as seen by the present, and to dialogue with it.

Another interesting element to be approached is the axis of the History of Life. In this, it is our responsibility to investigate when we honor the myth of Anna Nery as a character in Nursing History, but without the clarity of who she was in the past, of who she was beyond myth. This is because research<sup>(10)</sup> carried out on the person Anna Nery points out that, in the Nineteenth Century, she requested the granting of four lotteries as an aid for an infirmary created by her in 1871; however, the request was denied by the Central Board of Public Hygiene.

Sometimes, reflecting on the theme in terms of the historical approach, means to have the feeling that the past is, in reality, in the present, but with a garment differentiated by the context. Thus, not knowing what happened in the past does not mean identifying where we were, where we are, and where we want to go, which leaves us stagnated by the belief established or crystallized by the investigations that are of interest to us, denying the possibilities of new versions and interpretations.

To progress through this line of thought is to lead reflection with regard to the participation of nursing assistants and technicians in the career of the profession, individuals who are sometimes excluded in the historicity of nursing.

Thus, in order for nursing history research to go beyond appropriation in discourses, it must be understood that it does not belong only to nurses, but also to nursing technicians and assistants. In other words, it is transverse to the human trajectory, from care in the preservation of life to the distance of death<sup>(15)</sup>, which establishes another challenge: How do you see yourself in the history of humanity?

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