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Historical research and its contributions to Nursing

A pesquisa histórica e seus contributos para a enfermagem

La investigación histórica y sus aportes a la enfermería

Maria Itayra Padilha¹ ORCID: 0000-0001-9695-640X

¹ Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina – UFSC, Departamento de Enfermagem. Florianópolis, SC, Brasil.

Historical studies in the field of nursing are about 60 years old, with one of the milestones being the Chair Thesis of Glete de Âlcantara defended in 1963, titled “*A enfermagem moderna como categoria profissional: obstáculos à sua expansão na sociedade brasileira*” (Modern nursing as a professional category: obstacles to its expansion in Brazilian society)¹, the first in Latin America. Although this does not characterize as a historical study per se, the author carried out a historical-social foundation in constructing her object, discussing aspects about the professional identity of nursing and serving as reflection material for many other studies. Contemporary to this thesis, we have the book by Waleska Paixão, “*História da Enfermagem*” (History of Nursing)², originally published in 1951 and later reprinted five more times. The book, the first in Brazil to narrate the history of the profession over the centuries up to the year of its publication, was used as a textbook in nursing courses at the middle level, undergraduate, and graduate levels until approximately the 1990s.

What do these two studies have in common and why are we referencing them? Both were written in a historical period that preceded the creation of stricto sensu nursing graduate programs, which would only occur in 1972 with the creation of the first master’s degree in *Escola de Enfermagem Anna Nery*. Both authors were nurses / researchers from Nursing Schools and active participants in the *Associação Brasileira de Enfermagem* (ABEn, Brazilian nursing association). Both were extremely concerned about the quality of research and education for the training of nurses, as well as with qualified and responsible professional practice. Another characteristic of both authors is that they were not trained historians, but they understood the importance of historical studies for the understanding and appreciation of the nursing profession.

And then I ask myself: do we need to be trained historians to write historical studies? I say this because I recently heard from a researcher, who is a trained historian, the following phrase: ‘only those with a degree in History are historians.’

This statement made me reflect on the numerous researchers who have delved into and understood the history of the profession without having completed a degree in History. What would they be? Intruders in someone else’s field? Irresponsible for calling themselves historians without the formal training? What about renowned theorists like the philosopher and also called “Historian of Ideas,” Michel Foucault, who graced us with many historical studies, including “*A história da loucura na*

Corresponding author

Maria Itayra Padilha
E-mail: itayra.padilha@ufsc.br

Idade Clássica” “ (*Histoire de la Folie à l'Âge Classique*)³ and “*A História da sexualidade*”⁴ (The History of Sexuality), among others. Irving Goffman, an anthropologist and sociologist, provided us with works such as “*Manicômio, prisões e conventos*” (Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates)⁵, a classic in discussions about stigma. Similarly, sociologist Norbert Elias, through his reflections in his books on the civilizing process, historically outlined a new way of understanding and reflecting on civilizations and societies. All these authors, not formally trained in History, are considered historians of profession or ideas due to their tireless dedication to understanding and deciphering the mysteries of life and human relationships from a historical perspective.

In the dictionary, when we look up the term historian, we find “one who is dedicated to the study of history.”⁶ And if “History is the science that studies human actions over time. The work of the historian includes a thorough analysis of documents that allow the study of the past. History is the science that studies past events and the actions of man over time.” To what extent is it written that only people who have completed a degree in History can be historians?

This counterpoint is not against specific training in History; on the contrary, trained historians have laid the foundation for enthusiasts of history to learn the path to researching history and contributing knowledge in this field. Nurses, when studying their history, necessarily appropriate and approach interdisciplinary territories, not just historians, but also anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, just to name a few, because without them it is not possible to understand the processes through which the history of the profession was built⁷. This has indeed been influenced by the “new History,” which broadened the historian’s perspective to include other disciplines, establishing “good neighbor relations” among them. Each discipline carries its particularities and retrieves the past through interdisciplinary bridges, like a kaleidoscope with numerous facets⁸.

Beyond the thought of “who owns what,” the history of Nursing as an area of knowledge and research is recognized by its peers and by other fields and has been consolidating in Brazil over the last 35 years, motivated especially by two important issues. The first, in our assessment, is due to the gradual expansion of graduate programs in Nursing, influencing the production of theses and dissertations with a historiographical perspective. The second, as a consequence of the first, is the creation of research groups and laboratories focused on the History of Nursing from the 1990s onward^{7,9}.

Conducting a quick search in virtual libraries, “*Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde (BVS)*”, “*Enfermagem*” and SciELO, with the terms “*História da Enfermagem*” and Nursing History, we identified about 11,125 works (abstracts, full texts, theses, dissertations, books, etc.) in BVS. In SciELO, which includes only complete articles, we retrieved 2,178 studies. In the PubMed database, 33,344 articles were identified. We did not specify a historical cut or perform a qualitative analysis of the material found, as this was not the objective. Rather, it was to get an idea of the production of studies, based on others already conducted with some historical perspective over time, which have served as a guiding base for understanding the development of professions, the emergence of hospitals, professional identity, historical figures, and the development of biological and health sciences.^{7,9}

The valorization of a profession in society is due to its historical trajectory approached with scientific rigor, highlighting the importance of the profession throughout the history of humanity¹⁰. In fact, as we understand the history of a profession, such as nursing in our case, we realize how nursing is inseparable from other activities of life, from the world of health, and its social commitments. It is with this perspective that History adheres to the possibility of outlining and identifying who they are, what they think, what they feel, how they act, and what the future perspectives are for nurses in their journey as a professional group.

In conclusion, the search for professional recognition and the appreciation of each field of knowledge is a challenge faced by the area of Nursing History, which can be perceived as it enhances its visibility through scientific production, specific events, museums or documentation centers in nursing history, and the expansion of existing centers, laboratories, and groups throughout the national territory. It is also worth mentioning that the field of Nursing History has benefited from the investigations carried out by the ones like historians, sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists about health professions, contributing to a different perspective on the understanding of the profession.

Based on what has been presented, it is now possible to speak of a History of Nursing that has undergone numerous phases and includes works of varying significance produced by both trained

historians and professional historians, with the same intention. The goal is to build knowledge about the history of the profession and its constituents, thereby presenting high-quality works that can be used by all researchers in the fields of Health, Nursing, and related areas. These works not only aid in reflecting on the historicity of the profession but also on the health problems nursing has been competently and scientifically addressed.

Nursing is strengthened by historical studies, as they bring to light all historicity, imprinting new dimensions of knowledge and practices, with diverse views of the world and science. The consolidation of historical research methodologies is fundamental for critical construction and historiographic inference.

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