

# Perceptions and expectations of nurses concerning their professional activity

Percepções e expectativas dos enfermeiros sobre sua atuação profissional

Augusto Hernán Ferreira Umpiérrez<sup>1</sup>

Miriam Aparecida Barbosa Merighi<sup>2</sup>

Luz Angélica Muñoz<sup>3</sup>

## Keywords

Nursing care; Health management; Qualitative research; Legislation, nursing; Workload

## Descritores

Cuidados de enfermagem; Gestão em saúde; Pesquisa qualitativa; Legislação de enfermagem; Carga de trabalho

## Submitted

April 22, 2012

## Accepted

March 27, 2013

## Abstract

**Objective:** To learn how nurses perceive their professional activity and what are their expectations concerning the development of comprehensive care management.

**Methods:** Qualitative research with Alfred Schütz's social phenomenology approach. The participants were nine female nurses who worked at public and private hospitals in Montevideo, Uruguay.

**Results:** The nurses experience the gap between theory and practice, administrative overload, insecurity to take over care management and pursuit of formal and informal knowledge; they show desires and specific definitions, autonomy and professional identity, and professional valuation.

**Conclusion:** The nurses perceive their professional activity as having a gap between theory and practice, administrative overload, insecurity to take over care management and pursuit of formal and informal knowledge, with expectations and desires of recovery and definitions of specific duties, autonomy and professional identity.

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** Conhecer como os enfermeiros percebem sua atuação profissional e quais suas expectativas sobre o desenvolvimento das gestões do cuidado integral.

**Métodos:** Pesquisa qualitativa com abordagem da fenomenologia social de Alfred Schütz. Os sujeitos foram nove enfermeiras que trabalhavam em hospitais públicos e privados de Montevideo, Uruguai.

**Resultados:** Os enfermeiros vivenciam a distância entre a teoria e a prática, a sobrecarga administrativa, a insegurança para assumir a gestão de cuidado e a busca de conhecimento formal e informal; mostram desejos de definições específicas, autonomia e identidade profissional, valorização da profissão.

**Conclusão:** Os enfermeiros percebem a sua atuação profissional como distante entre a teoria e a prática, sobrecarga administrativa, insegurança para assumir a gestão do atendimento e a busca do conhecimento formal e informal, com expectativas e desejos de recuperação e de definições de funções específicas, autonomia e identidade profissional.

## Corresponding author

Augusto Hernán Ferreira Umpiérrez  
8 de Octubre Avenue, 2738,  
Montevideo, Uruguay.  
aufferrei@ucu.edu.uy

<sup>1</sup>Facultad de Enfermería y Tecnologías de la Salud, Universidad Católica del Uruguay, Montevideo, Uruguay.

<sup>2</sup>Escola de Enfermagem, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brazil.

<sup>3</sup>Facultad de Enfermería, Universidad Andrés Bello, Santiago de Chile.

**Conflicts of interest:** there is no conflict of interest to declare.

## Introduction

Care management is an essential component of the role addressed in various regulations of professional practice.<sup>(1)</sup> It is a process of human resource mobilization in the workplace. Hence, the role of managing nurses will be to lead and support those delivering care by promoting their visibility,<sup>(2,3)</sup> besides departing from the work performed by a nursing team and professional autonomy, expressed by legislation, to enable them to properly take on nursing decisions and actions.<sup>(4)</sup>

There is evidence, however, that nurses, in their practice, experience frustrations and dissatisfactions in relation to their activities. A study undertaken in Brazil shows that nurses have some knowledge about administration and management, but that they are not able to put them into practice. In addition, this study highlights that nurses see the conflict between how their role is viewed and how it is actually performed.<sup>(5)</sup>

It is necessary to change this reality with critical professionals who promote and defend health, professionals committed to the profession, in so far as they incorporate the knowledge found in the literature into their practice.<sup>(6)</sup>

Continuous education is essential for the development of skills with a view to incorporating these aspects into daily professional practice. The results of a study about the skills of Brazilian nurses concluded that, in general, there are no formal institutional policies covering professional skills.<sup>(7)</sup>

It is important to reflect on the healthcare context for the performance of healthcare practices in management processes in an area where there is a relationship between nurses and patients, other professionals and the organization, which constitutes and represents certain characteristics in the nursing work process and which affects one of its basic areas: care management.<sup>(8)</sup>

Based on this scenario, this study raises the following questions: How do nurses perceive the tasks of their professional role in the performance of daily practice? How do they perform nursing care in relation to medical practice? What are their expectations in relation to their role in the management

of care, based on legislation that defines their professional activity and establishes the obligations of their profession?

It is important to emphasize the study of the perceptions, desires and expectations of nurses, to achieve the profession's emancipatory objectives. The results of revealing the activity these professionals perform will certainly contribute to better understand the subject and to take strategic decisions, which can change the nurses' situation and their best professional position.

The objective of this research is to understand how nurses perceive their professional activity and what are their expectations in the development of nursing care management.

## Methods

This is a qualitative study, based on the premise that knowledge about people is possible with the description of human experience, how it is experienced and how it is defined by its actors.<sup>(9)</sup> The phenomenological method was chosen.<sup>(10)</sup>

The approach adopted was the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, which provides a systematic approach to better understand the social aspects of human action. This approach offers a way to articulate concepts of intentionality, intersubjectivity, human actions, social relations, expectations and others so that, like in this study, a better understanding can be achieved about the social world of nursing professionals.<sup>(11)</sup> The understanding of this situation, experienced in everyday life, is an analysis of the social behavior in relation to the nurses' reasons.

This framework has as its core the social action theory, viewed as the initiator of the changes occurred in everyday life. Actions take place on the grounds of existing reasons related to past and present experiences (reasons why) and to the projections that constitute the possibility of the action itself, early action, imagined, subjective meaning of the action (reasons for). It is classified as a common conceptual matrix that translates the actions of a certain social group.<sup>(12)</sup>

One of the key concepts of this framework is the intersubjectivity, which is a precondition of social life. This world does not exist in the subjective sphere, but in an intersubjectivity in which experiences are reciprocally interpreted. In this sense, the relationship takes place face-to-face, since there is always someone available for another's direct experience when sharing the same space.

Another concept of the social phenomenology framework concerns the so-called natural attitude, which is how the human being experiences the intersubjective world incorporated to the world in the real sense. This attitude is influenced by the knowledge base and by the biographic situation of each person, the manner in which previous experiences are kept, and these determine the relevant elements of action.

The study was carried out in Montevideo, Uruguay, and nine nurses participated, who worked at both public and private hospitals. Data collection took place between September and November 2009, after asking the professionals about their availability to participate in the study. The statements were obtained through open interviews, which were recorded upon guarantee of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality in relation to the information provided.

Given the nature of the study, the number of participants was not previously defined and data collection was finished when the information showed signs of revealing the situation, the queries of the researchers were answered and the objectives achieved.<sup>(13)</sup>

The interviews were guided by the following questions: How do you perform your daily practice activities in relation to the management of patient care? What are your expectations in relation to your role as a manager of care xxxxxx? The statements were fully transcribed, thus ensuring the integrity of the process and the phenomenological reduction that is aimed at reaching the essence of the ways which are part of the psychic experience of others.<sup>(14)</sup>

The analysis of the interviews followed the steps prescribed by the qualitative data analysis<sup>(15)</sup> and by the researchers of social phenomenology:<sup>(16)</sup> careful reading of each interview in order to capture the

essence of each experience lived by nurses; grouping of significant aspects in the statements to form the categories and their analysis, aiming to understand the reasons for and the reasons why concerning the action of nurses and the discussion about the results in the light of the social phenomenology of Alfred Schütz and other frameworks related to the subject. The solid categories were composed of descriptions that expressively showed the experience of the professionals in relation to their professional activity, named: theory and practice, administrative overload, pursuit of knowledge, insecurity, specific definitions, autonomy, professional identity and professional valuation.

The development of the study complied with the international standards for ethics in research involving human beings.

## Results

According to the framework adopted, the participants' reasons why were represented by the categories developed through the nurses' statements.

The theory and the practice: [...] I try to perform the best possible management. It has not been too long since I learned and I remember how it was emphasized at University that, without theoretical foundation and methodology, this profession would not grow. But it is often difficult [...] D1; [...] it is in every book, it is the topic of all classes, but then you start working, get into a routine and end up practicing without thinking about it; [...] I see it daily at my work, both providing care and teaching and it is interesting to have the two perspectives. I try to put everything I teach into practice when providing care, but it is sometimes complicated [...] D7.

Another category developed was related to the administrative overload: [...] there are a number of administrative tasks, but not administrative in relation to administering care or managing the care delivered to patients, they are matters related to the coordination of studies, following up visits with the doctors, issuing pendent prescriptions, it is not easy [...] D1; [...] sometimes, you even forget the care

practices, because what you mostly do, and therefore, what you have practice in, relates to administrative matters...increasingly [...] D3; [...] as a matter of need, we have chosen to delegate our activities, which makes me largely realize that we have lost prestige because we are seen as mere administrators [...] D4.

Also in relation to nurses' experience, the category pursuit of knowledge emerged: [...] when you start your activities in a department, you learn many things with the colleagues who show you how to perform the work [...] D4; [...] you learn with the young colleagues, those who have just graduated and are able to perform well the management of the work because they have everything fresh in their minds [...] D6; [...] we have to continuously update our skills, search for upgrading courses, always learn, and perform a good management and activities relating to the care [...] this is a need of our country [...] I have learnt with other colleagues, it is important to see and learn from others [...] D8.

The last category, related to the reasons why, was insecurity: [...] I work with nurses' education. Sometimes, I think that they are really ready to take on some things. Sometimes, I see the young guys, and I think the same [...] D7; [...] the issue is to fulfill the obligations [...] D9.

The reasons for, according to the adopted framework, were included in the categories presented below:

The specific definitions arise based on the analysis of parts of the statements: [...] I believe that if there was a law for us, it would be very good that roles were defined so that we would know that we have a legislation that has never happened [...] D1; [...] it would be very good in order to define what we do and what we do not do, that is, that our profession has a meaning [...] D2, [...] I hope that our activity area is further defined, as I said, and that these obligations are accompanied by commensurate financial reward [...] D7.

Another category that relates to the expectations of nurses were autonomy and professional identity, [...] I am hopeful that our role is clearly defined and what we, nurses, do and nobody else does what is ours, that is, to charge our professional identity

[...] D2; [...] I would say that it is necessary to define and clarify some issues to legislate on the issue, I suppose that, if there are laws, there will be a support giving us more autonomy and defining our area of activity, this is my desire [...] D7; [...] I hope that we have more autonomy, recognition, especially in the social scope [...] D8.

Finally, the professional valuation category emerged: [...] I would like us to be valued, it is said that the nurse is needed, but then we are replaced by an assistant, without a problem [...] D5; [...] there are more things that I would expect: our appreciation, recognition and our recognizing by ourselves, because sometimes it is so talked about identity and we are not clear about the meaning of it [...] D6.

## Discussion

Despite bringing experiences full of meanings, the results of the present study have, as a limiting factor, the fact that it was undertaken with nurses from the same social group in a specific situation. Given the particularities mentioned herein, it is suggested that further researches approaching this subject are carried out in order to reveal other aspects which were not identified. It is necessary to emphasize that it offers an interesting contribution to the understanding of the recognition of nurses' work.

The categories related to the reasons why, theory and practice, administrative overload, pursuit of knowledge and insecurity show a common feeling among the groups of nurses, constituting part of their features.

The role of nurses as managers of care is one of the profession's characteristics.<sup>(3)</sup> The results of a study concerning the role of these professionals show difficulties in developing the inherent duties of their position, thus causing frustration and dissatisfaction, mainly because they are not able to practically apply their knowledge of management.<sup>(5)</sup>

The manner in which they perform their activities is related to their acquired knowledge and their experiences. They cannot apply the theory they learned during their formal education to the daily work and, as a result, find it hard to implement

what they learned. For this reason, it is necessary to execute a joint planning of the professional practice with healthcare students, professors and nurses. This will be a way to coordinate educational and professional practices.<sup>(17)</sup>

It can be noted that nurses pursue knowledge through experiences that are part of their acquired knowledge. They show the wealth of learning with others; with those who continually teach and provide opportunities to increase their knowledge baggage and that constitutes an exchange of subjectivity (intersubjectivity), which is a relevant concept in the social phenomenology approach.<sup>(18)</sup>

From the nurses' statements, it is clear that there is a need for further learning and investing in continuous education, given that some of them feel uninstructed and outdated. For this reason, they pursue knowledge and learning in different ways to meet the demands and needs related to the management of patient care.

The need for formal education and constant pursuit of knowledge, found in the present research, also appears in the findings of another study, highlighting that nurses require appropriate training interventions in order to take over the process of management and nursing care with effective tools.<sup>(19)</sup>

Therefore, it is believed that the post-graduate course will certainly contribute to the development of professional knowledge, which will be applied and, among other issues, will be able to improve practical skills, with specialized and therapy related knowledge. This will allow the reorientation of the nursing practice, based on the development of autonomy and decision making related to their area of expertise.

As mentioned above, the reasons for specific definitions, autonomy and professional identity, and professional valuation show projects and expectations to fully develop the management of care in their services, with conditions that clearly define their professional role at a national level.

The nurses also expressed expectations about the definition of specific roles, increasing the hope concerning the definition of their professional role. They wish autonomy and professional identity, and decision making power in relation to specific issues

of their area of expertise. Their expectations are also related to the aspiration of being identified and recognized for what they really are, with professional valuation. These aspects constitute the features of this group in relation to their projects.

It is important to note that all of those people who share a social reality feel personal and social needs as part of a social group. The clear definition of their roles is the necessary determination for all people. The world-life of each one is largely composed of these considerations.

According to Schütz, people need to have a definition of the roles they perform in their daily practice, which determines their place in society and in a certain position, and that is part of their expectations.<sup>(20)</sup> The need felt by these professionals is shared and included in the intersubjectivity. The definition of their roles causes expectations on their reality and daily experience.<sup>(5)</sup>

The issue related to the role of nurses is often addressed and studied in various scenarios. Emphasis is placed on the idea that it is possible to build the professional identity and put into practice the specific duties of nurses based on the definition of their role. Professional nurses have many difficulties to explain the definition of their role, which affects the concepts of autonomy of the profession.<sup>(21)</sup>

Certainly, the development of knowledge in the country will contribute for the core aspects of the professional role to emerge, showing the social and health impact that the professional nursing activity can achieve. The desire related to professional identity and autonomy can be seen in other studies.<sup>(22,23)</sup> This lack of identity is a relevant characteristic of the studied group, being their features relevant elements of the social world.<sup>(24)</sup>

It is believed, however, that the emancipatory objectives of the profession can be related to the essence of care and interaction between nurses and patients, nurses and families, nurses and the community. For this assistance, it becomes necessary to understand and internalize the intersubjectivity that occurs in the relationship between those who provide care and those who receive and participate in it. In this reciprocity of intentions, besides the technical and scientific skills, caregivers need to es-

establish a process of growth and learning for both parties while expressing their sensitivity, respect for values and empathy. In this scenario, care is no longer a mere intervention, since it becomes a helping relationship in a professional, holistic and human way, which leaves room for creativity in the world of social relationships. This line of action is essential for the profession to obtain the skills to provide care.

According to some authors, the development of the professional role, largely identified by a careful management, is closely related to the autonomy and professional identity concepts.<sup>(23,25)</sup> These studies show that, similarly to the perceptions of the nurses participating in the present research, these expectations are constantly developing and, for some time, discussions about the independence of the professional practice have been taking place.

The issue becomes relevant in defining roles, responsibilities and autonomy of nurses. Investigating these professionals' experiences in the daily development of their role, and knowing their motivations, aspirations and behaviors, based on a new and more experimental perspective, will certainly contribute to better understand the needs and expectations of this social group concerning their professional activity. The approach of their professional experience can be crucial in ensuring consistency between the care delivered and the patients' needs.

Based on the approach used in this study, its development revealed the need for transformation in the profession, establishing proposals that can be forwarded through three key inter-related elements: the empowerment of care management, improving the profile of graduates, connecting professors to care; the investment in scientific researches based on other aspects of care and professional visibility, with promotion and creation of master's and Ph.D. programs; and the development of a professional emancipation process with professional valuation.

The generation of knowledge through research, connecting studies with professional practice with innovation and internationalization, is a way of showing the contributions offered by the profession in the healthcare area, promoting the development of policies, regulations and social behavior, whilst

understanding that the future of healthcare depends on the potential of the professional nursing activity, which is seen as a live and specialized power and a support to the system.

## Conclusion

The nurses perceive their professional activity as having a gap between theory and practice, administrative overload, insecurity to take over care management and pursuit of formal and informal knowledge, with expectations and desires of recovery and definitions of specific duties, autonomy and professional identity.

## Collaborations

Umpiérrez AHF; Merighi MAB and Muñoz LA declare they contributed to the project conception, analysis and interpretation of data, drafting of the article, relevant review of the intellectual contents and final approval of the version to be published.

## References

1. Milos H P, Bórquez PB, Larraín SA. [The concept of "management of care" in Chilean law: interpretation and scope]. *Cienc Enferm*. 2010;16(1):17-29. Spanish.
2. del Pino Casado R, Martínez Riera JR. [Strategies to improve visibility and accessibility of nursing cares in primary health care]. 2007;5(2):311-37. Spanish.
3. Zarate Grajales R. [Management of nursing care]. *Index Enferm*. 2004;13(44-45):42-6. Spanish
4. Casabona Martínez I, Lillo Crespo M. [Healthcare management and cultural competence]. *Cultura de los cuidados*. 2006;10(20):83-6. Spanish.
5. Willig M, Lenardt M, Trentini M. [Management and care in hemodialysis units]. *Rev Bras Enferm*. 2006;59(2):177-82. Portuguese.
6. Souza AC, Muniz Filha MJ, Silva LF, Monteiro AR, Fialho AV. [Education of the nurse for caring: reflections of professional practice]. *Rev Bras Enferm*. 2006;59(6):805-7. Portuguese.
7. Ferreira JC, Kurcgant P. Directors of nursing point of view of the professional capacitating program for nurses working in major teaching medical centers. *Acta Paul Enferm*. 2009;22(1):31-6.
8. Rossi FR, Lima MA. [Fundamentals for managing process in care practices]. *Rev Esc Enferm USP*. 2005;39(4):460-8.
9. Polit DF, Beck CT. Generalization in quantitative and qualitative research: myths and strategies. *Int J Nurs Stud*. 2010;47(11):1451-8.
10. Capalbo C. [The phenomenology from Edmund Husserl and its repercussion in the health area]. *Rev Enferm UERJ*. 1998;6(2):415-9. Portuguese.

11. Rodríguez B, Santana JS, Pacheco ST, Ciuffo LL, Gomes AP, Rosa JS, et al. [Ethics in nursing care: contributions from the sociological phenomenology of Alfred Schütz]. *Rev Enferm UERJ*. 2011; 9(2):236-41. Portuguese.
12. Freitas GF, Oguiso T, Merighi MA. [Factors that motivate nurse's reactions to unethical behaviors]. *Acta Paul Enferm*. 2006;19(1 Suppl 1):76-81. Portuguese.
13. Martínez-Salgado C. [Sampling in qualitative research. Basic principles and some controversies]. *Ciênc Saúde Coletiva*. 2012;17(3):613-9. Spanish.
14. Martins J, Bicudo MA. *A pesquisa cualitativa em psicologia: fundamentos e recursos básicos*. 5a ed. San Pablo: Centauro; 2005.
15. Arias Valencia MM, Giraldo Mora CV. [Scientific rigor in qualitative research]. *Invest Educ Enferm*. 2011;29(3):500-14. Spanish.
16. Merighi M. [Professional trajectory of obstetric nurses from the University of São Paulo College of Nursing: a focus on social phenomenology]. *Rev Latinoam Enferm*. 2002;10(5):644-53. Portuguese.
17. Resck ZM, Gomes EL. Background and managerial practice of nurses: paths for transforming praxis. *Rev Latinoam Enferm*. 2008;16(1):71-7.
18. Souza MH, Souza IE, Tocantins FR. [Phenomenological sociological approach on the investigation of women who breastfeed]. *Rev Enferm UERJ*. 2009;17(1):52-6. Portuguese.
19. Ferrer Pardavila A, García Sampedro R, Barreiro Bello J. El proceso de atención y la relación de ayuda en enfermería pediátrica. *Cultura de los Cuidados*. 2003;7(13):52-62.
20. Gomes AM, Oliveira DC. [The social representation of nurse's professional autonomy in public health]. *Rev Bras Enferm*. 2005;58(4):393-8. Portuguese.
21. Bueno FM, Queiroz MS. [The nurse and the construction of professional autonomy in the care process]. *Rev Bras Enferm*. 2006;59 (2):222-7. Portuguese.
22. Milos Hurtado P. [Professional practice and responsibility of nurse professionals]. *Horiz Enferm*. 2007;8(2):12-9. Spanish.
23. Nauderer T, Lima MA. [Nurse's image: literature review]. *Rev Bras Enferm*. 2005;58(1):74-7. Portuguese.
24. Schütz A. *Estudios sobre teoria social: escrito II*. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu; 2003.
25. Pires MR. [Politicity of care as an emancipatory reference for nursing: getting to know to care better, delivering care to confront, delivering care to emancipate]. *Rev Latinoam Enferm*. 2005;13(5):729-36. Portuguese.