

Nursing and work

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The texts presented in this issue will discuss nursing activity; therefore, teaching, research and care delivery may be considered.

Characteristic aspects of sensual care delivered by nurses will be approached. It is also stated that nursing activity is still unknown to a considerable number of people in our society and that it is influenced by both public and private sectors in many different ways. Nursing activity means exposure; thus, it can be contaminated in the several contacts established in an imaginary network and in real life. During this process, pleasure and suffering, joy and pain are created as partners of life chronicle. Also discussed is the price paid by modern work, that is, the risk of living a bad life and daring to see the work closer.

The last decades have seen drastic changes in social relations. The increased unemployment also increased individual suffering: the more individualistic, the more people suffer. How can we possibly accept the fact that we are well-born, well-bred, gifted but unsuccessful?

Since we face such unemployment, why don't we deprive the word 'employment' of every value? This would undo an opposition between work ethics and a no-job aesthetics that prevent workers from engaging in the construction of a pleasant life for themselves. Why do female workers search for impossible virtues (men's merit, masculinity)?

An issue proposed for research on mental health is the analysis of how work becomes constitutive of the modern subject, serving as a link between the individual order and the general order. The way man intervenes on nature is certainly a cultural and, thus, historical issue. The constitution of values that compose the symbolical order in a given society may attribute different status to work.

In Ancient Greece, work was considered a dishonourable activity. The Middle Ages regarded work as much a function as eating or sleeping; the ethos of peasantry believed that devoting oneself to a task was part of a good peasant's duties. Thus, the group's productive balance was maintained and there was no distinction between the peasant's occupation and the role he played in the group.

Along the years, a slow but progressive cultural transformation of the constituted values was necessary, so that work could become the measure of value in modern societies, i.e., so that nowadays time can be exchanged for money. It was necessary to secularize work, to deprive it from its sacred character, its

transcendence. It was necessary to give it an earthly character, that is, to consider it like goods or property that can be accumulated. Therefore, it had to be endowed with a calculation spirit, one that anticipates and looks after the future. Such spirit must be guided by a view of the world that is characterized by a linear time as opposed to the mythical circle time, in which past and future are inscribed in the present.

However, depriving work from its sacred character is not enough. It must be urged to produce according to a new order: usefulness and productiveness. Work is not valued more because of the role it plays in the balance of a certain group, but rather for what it produces in surplus. That is why bodies and souls had to be trained from the 17th and 18th centuries on.

The disciplinary practice inherited from the monasteries establishes a distinct time for the accomplishment of each activity. Such practice is transformed into an element of a political technology for duration and for bodies that are individualized and articulate. They gather forces for an efficient apparatus, whose objective does not culminate in a world to come, tending instead to a submission that was never really finished.

The disciplinary power stipulates ways for subject apprehension and treatment, having individualizing effects. It produces hard-working individuals, who claim to be free and equal. However, in such egalitarian society, work creates differences between men and women, parents and children, employers and employees, professionals and intellectuals and, finally, between those who have a job and those who don't.

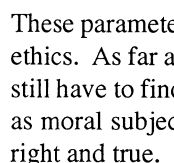
The ethical issue will be considered as the second object of this paper, but the discussion on the historical and philosophical nature of ethics will be dismissed. I believe it is possible for us to agree with the use of our culture's ethical grounds. Put in simple words, ethics is everything related to whatever is good, fair, honourable and morally appropriate. For me ethics is, then, every action, state or intention that may be considered in the "this-is-right-this-is-wrong" context or justified by reasons of the kind.

How can we bring the concepts of ethics and work closer?

First of all, we – nurses, nursing technicians and assistants – were not created nursing workers, but rather have become workers. Therefore, we have to consider the countless variables that enabled us to get into the world of professional education, regardless of educational (secondary or university) level. What really matters is the *ethos* of the worker, not his/her educational background.

Besides, we must be aware that when we graduate as nurses, nursing technicians or assistants, we are conferred a social mandate to care. And, then, we will be faced with responsibility and care. We will be faced with ethics. And what would it be like? The ethics of suffering.

This is a simple but negative maxim. It says that the worst we can do to others is to be cruel. Thus, it is rather prescriptive than preceptive, because nothing you can possibly do may attack the physical and moral integrity of your fellowman.



These parameters are important for bringing up a permanent discussion on nursing ethics. As far as nursing practice and professional competence are concerned, we still have to find out what makes the individuals under our care behave once again as moral subjects, that is, express ethical judgements about what is good, useful, right and true.

Emphasizing the individual or individualism makes us forget about commitments that are related to everything else but to ourselves. More and more we are creating specific populations and typifications. More and more we specialize in HIV positive individuals, elderly people, black people, homosexuals, women, children, etc. More and more we are creating a world of tribes, in which there's hardly a reference to "us", that is not necessarily metaphysical. On the other hand, it is a world in which a physical, bodily happiness is emphasized. More and more we highlight individual characteristics. But what for? For employing healthy people? Where? For what purpose? For living alone in a big city like 50% of the population? For losing contact with his fellowman, because the code for communication is gone?

I think we have been living a trifling misery. In short, this atrocity makes us think over and over about where our theories will lead us and whether or not we will be able to criticize the social symptom.

As far as ethics is concerned, the question we all should be asking is the same Clarice Lispector's Macabea asked Olímpico de Jesus: "Being happy? What's that for?"

Ideas have consequences. Those who claim to themselves the right to think or speak on behalf of their field of work must wake up to reality. Much more than this: they must keep the dream alive.