ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Negative nursing stereotypes: past or present?

Estereótipos negativos na Enfermagem: passado ou presente?

Estereotipos negativos en Enfermería: ¿Pasado o presente?

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: nursing has been moving towards the formation of its own body of knowledge through increased research and technological advances. However, the social image of the profession identified in society seems to reflect an invisible professional with an outdated professional image associated with negative stereotypes. **Aim:** to analyze the presence of negative stereotypes associated with nurses' social image in the literature. **Method:** integrative literature review study that included scientific articles published from 2007 to 2013, in the databases: BVS, CINAHL / EBSCO, MEDLINE, Scopus and Web of Science. **Results and Discussion:** fourteen studies dealing with the image of nursing met inclusion criteria, 57.1% showed low incidence of negative stereotypes, 35.7% showed high incidence of negative stereotypes and 7.2% did not find negative stereotypes. Negative stereotypes such as low status and subordination to the medical field were evidenced. However positive stereotypes such as careerist were also identified. **Closing Remarks:** the results indicate the possibility of improvement in the social image of nursing. These stereotypes about the profession remain in the social imagination, causing anachronism, making difficult the recognition and appreciation of this profession.
Descriptors: Nursing; Nursing History; Social Perception; Stereotyping.

RESUMO

Introdução: a Enfermagem tem avançado para a conformação de sua própria base de conhecimentos, através de crescentes progressos na pesquisa e tecnologia. Porém, o imaginário social da profissão, identificado na sociedade, parece refletir um profissional invisível, com uma imagem profissional desatualizada e associada a estereótipos negativos. **Objetivo:** analisar a presença de estereótipos negativos associados com a imagem social de enfermeiros na literatura. **Método:** revisão integrativa

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da literatura incluindo artigos científicos publicados entre 2007 e 2013 nas seguintes bases de dados: BVS, CINAHL / EBSCO, MEDLINE, Scopus e Web of Science. **Resultados e discussão:** quatorze estudos que investigaram a imagem da Enfermagem atenderam aos critérios de inclusão: 57,1% indicaram baixa incidência de estereótipos negativos, 35,7% apresentaram alta incidência de estereótipos negativos e 7,2% não encontraram estereótipos negativos. Estereótipos negativos como baixo status e subordinação ao campo da Medicina tornaram-se evidentes. No entanto, estereótipos positivos, como ser carreirista, também foram identificados. **Considerações finais:** os resultados indicam a possibilidade de melhoria da imagem social da Enfermagem. Esses estereótipos sobre a profissão permanecem no imaginário do coletivo social, gerando anacronismo e dificultando o reconhecimento e a valorização dessa profissão.
Descritores: Enfermagem; História da Enfermagem; Percepção Social; Estereotipagem.

RESUMEN

Introducción: la Enfermería ha venido avanzando hacia la conformación de su propio bagaje de conocimientos a través de mayores progresos en investigación y tecnología. Sin embargo, la imagen social de la profesión que se identifica en la sociedad parece reflejar a un profesional invisible con una anticuado imagen profesional y asociada a estereotipos negativos. **Objetivo:** analizar la presencia de estereotipos negativos asociados con la imagen social de los enfermeros en la literatura. **Método:** revisión integradora de la literatura que incluyó artículos científicos publicados entre 2007 y 2013 en las siguientes bases de datos: BVS, CINAHL / EBSCO, MEDLINE, Scopus y Web of Science. **Resultados y discusión:** catorce estudios que investigaron la imagen de la Enfermería cumplieron con los criterios de inclusión: el 57,1% indicó baja incidencia de estereotipos negativos, el 35,7% presentó gran incidencia de estereotipos negativos y el 7,2% no encontró estereotipos negativos. Se hicieron evidentes estereotipos negativos como bajo estatus y subordinación al campo de la Medicina. Sin embargo, también se identificaron estereotipos positivos como ser ambicioso en la carrera. **Consideraciones finales:** los resultados indican la posibilidad de mejora de la imagen social de la Enfermería. Estos estereotipos sobre la profesión permanecen en la imaginación del colectivo social, generando anacronismo y dificultando el reconocimiento y la valoración de esta profesión.
Descriptores: Enfermería; Historia de la Enfermería; Percepción Social; Estereotipos.

INTRODUÇÃO

Nursing has been moving towards the formation of its own body of knowledge through increased research and technological advances. In Brazil, the areas of work and fields of study have grown in the last decades, especially after the 1970s, with the advent of graduate programs in nursing. However, the social image of the profession identified in society seems to reflect an invisible professional with an outdated professional image associated with negative stereotypes.

The word stereotype is defined as a system of socially shared beliefs about the characteristics considered homogeneous in individuals of a given social category, which can be both positive and negative. The stereotyping of a social object can lead to uncertain generalizations based on established beliefs, leading to prejudice and discrimination[1]. Stereotypes do not necessarily correspond to reality. The construction process of stereotyping includes the development of categories, allowing the imposition of structures and meanings on events and objects[2].

Even though stereotypes are a way of understanding reality and confronting the unknown, in cases where the social object is an occupation, it is relevant to consider the interference stereotypes have on the image of this occupation, as they may influence working conditions, social recognition and remuneration[3].

In the case of Nursing, when analyzing stereotypes, one cannot lose sight of the importance of nursing history, because it contextualizes the historical origin of each stereotype, as well as its overcoming by science[4]. The image of nursing at any time will be the result of existing stereotypes, as well as the contemporaneous culture and its uses in the construction of a symbolic reality[2].

Throughout its history, nursing has been built and deconstructed, replacing old paradigms with more updated ones[5]. The profession is maturing due to advances in education and technology that have created new roles and responsibilities as well as social and political developments[2]. However, its relationship with society is still permeated by stereotypes and prejudices that influence the conception of what this profession truly is[5].

Regarding stereotypes themselves, the nursing literature is extensive. In a classic text, the authors identified and classified media nursing stereotypes in the United States into six categories: 1- angel of mercy, which refers to the image of the nurse as characteristics of nobility, morality, religiosity and selflessness; 2- Girl Friday which refers to an unprofessional image, with an emphasis on subordination to medicine and romance affairs; 3- Heroin, which refers to the nursing image characterized by bravery, dedication, humanization and autonomy; 4- Mother/wife which points to maternal characteristics, with an emphasis on affection, sympathy, passivity and protection; 5- Sexual object, where nurses are described as sensual, romantic, hedonistic, frivolous, irresponsible and promiscuous; and 6- Careerist, which refers to an intelligent, logical, progressive, sophisticated, empathic and assertive nursing professional[2].

Another study that identified and synthesized the results of research on the image of nursing, published between 1990 and 2007, found the following stereotypes: subordination to medicine, hard work, simple tasks, sacrifice and low status. However, socially valuable qualities such as humility, intelligence, technical and interpersonal skills were also identified[4].

In this sense, the issue becomes an important subject of study, since researchers have shown that these distorted images affect professional self-esteem, and job satisfaction[6,7]. The visibility of the profession may interfere with its power to claim improvements in working conditions with society or even in its understanding of its potential for health care and as an important opinion maker.

This study aimed to identify evidence in the literature about stereotypes in the social image of nurses, from 2007–2013, resulting from scientific research, continuing the previous study[4], and looking for continuities or ruptures in the results.

METHOD

This study consists of an integrative literature review on the social image of nurses. This research method allows the synthesis of several studies already performed, providing a general understanding of the phenomenon under analysis, and generating new knowledge[8].

The steps taken were: theme identification, literature search, categorization, evaluation of included studies, interpretation of results and synthesis of knowledge. The inclusion criteria were: research articles available in full, free access, in digital or physical forms, in Spanish, English or Portuguese, with the central theme of the social image of nursing. Exclusion criteria: editorials, opinions/comments and theses/monographs, literature review and articles about historical analysis of time periods. The temporal delimitation covers the period from 2007 to 2013, in order to continue the previous study[4], which conducted a narrative literature study on the subject from 1990 to 2007. The keywords used were: Nursing History; Stereotyping; Social Perception and Identity, all added with the word nursing. The review question was: What is the evidence in the literature about stereotypes in the social image of nurses, resulting from scientific research between 2007 and 2013?

The following electronic databases were used to select the articles: Virtual Health Library (BVS), Cumulative Index Nursing Allied Health Literature by EBSCO (CINAHL/EBSCO), Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), Scopus (SCOPUS) and Web of Science (WEB OF SCIENCE). The selected references were inserted in the EndNote program, allowing the deletion of references that were in duplicate.

The flowchart (Figure 1) shows the path taken to select the articles[9].

In the selection and eligibility process, 264 articles were excluded. Causes for exclusion were: 181 did not describe the social image of nursing as a central focus of interest, 35 articles were not research, 16 had limited information about the methodological process, 25 could not be accessed by researchers in online format or paper, and 7 were not among the languages set out in the inclusion criteria. Of the 14 articles that met the inclusion criteria, 8 are in English and 6 in Portuguese.
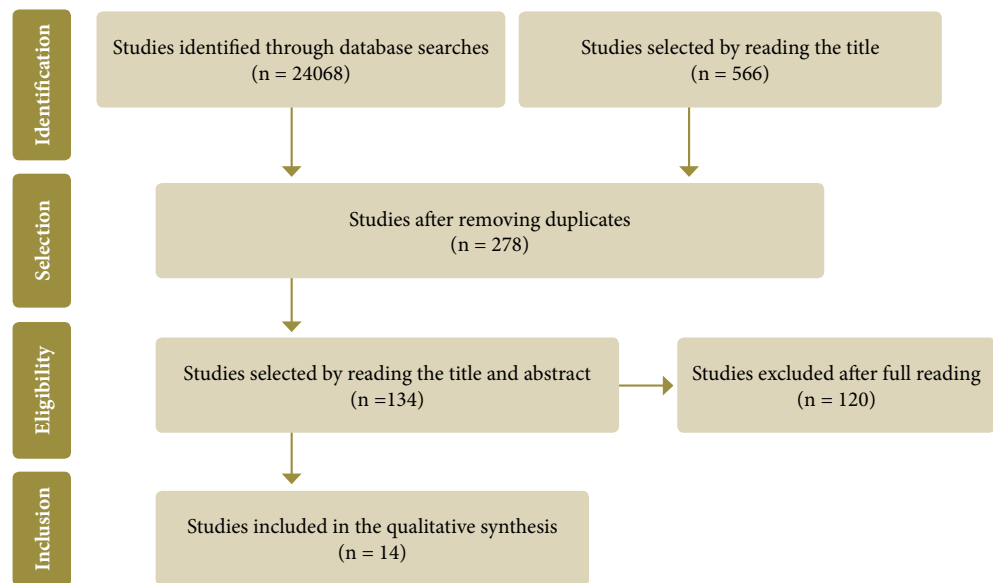
Figure 1 -   Flowchart of the selection of publications for the integrative review, based on the PRISMA model. Ribeirão Preto, SP, Brazil, 2021[9].

The third stage was the organization of a synthesis matrix for the extraction of information from the selected articles. The synthesis matrix, or analysis matrix, has been widely used as a tool for obtaining and organizing data from the literature review in order to eliminate subjectivity from the analysis process[10].

The fourth stage was characterized by the evaluation of the studies included by three researchers requiring consensus of at least two of these for each article. In the fifth stage the discussion and interpretation of the results took place and the sixth stage, the synthesis of knowledge was performed, with the categorization of the obtained elements.

To identify stereotypes, the stereotype classification of two studies was used as a parameter[2,4]. In the case of locating stereotypes not previously classified, new categories were created. For the critical analysis of the included studies, we used the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR), which formulates and sets standards for qualitative research. A list of 21 items was applied to the included articles, aiming to critically evaluate and synthesize previously included studies[11]. Included in the review were those that met at least 80% of the requirements outlined in the SRQR, with at least 17 of the 21 suggested items. For quantitative studies the existence of statistical analyzes compatible with the validated data and instruments was evaluated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the year of publication, there was a predominance of studies in 2007 with five studies (35.7%). Regarding the source, each study was published in one of the following journals, which had the following ratings at the time in the Qualis Capes Brazil (QCB), who evaluates the journals in all areas of Knowledge from A1 (best evaluation), to B5 (worst evaluation), or Journal Citation Reports 2016 Impact Factor (FI-JCR): Nurse Education Today (QBC A1, IF-JCR 2,533), Journal Nursing Outlook (IF-JCR 2.236), Journal of Advanced Nursing (QCB A1, IF-JCR 1.998), Journal of Nursing Management (QCB A1, IF-JCR 1.905), Applied Nursing Research (QCB A1 - IF-JCR 1.379), Journal of Nursing School (QCB A1, IF-JCR 1.146), Journal of Nursing Education (IF-JCR 0.957), Latin American Journal of Nursing (QCB A1, IF-JCR 0.634), School Magazine Nursing School (QCB A2, IF-JCR 0.573), Acta Paulista Nursing (QCB A2 IF-JCR 0.433), Gaúcha Journal of Nursing (QCB B1), Cogitare Nursing (QCB B1), Science, Care and Health Magazine (QCB B2), Africa Journal of Nursing and Midwifery (not rated QCB or FI-JCR).

It was observed that 8 (57.1%) articles were published in a journal of excellence by the JCR or QBC and 4 (28.6%) articles were published in prominent journals in the QBC as A2 or B1, in other words,

85.7% of articles had space in national or international prominent journals, showing the opening of impact journals for the publication of this theme.

Regarding the inclusion process of qualitative studies, using the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR), 8 articles answered 21 items, 1 article answered 18 items, 2 articles answered 17 items from SRQR, and 1 article was excluded from the study review as it met less than 80% of the requirements. Regarding the quantitative studies, three (3) articles met the inclusion criteria. Regarding the methodological design, 78.5% of the studies used a qualitative approach and 21.5% quantitative. Regarding the country of origin of the publications, a higher incidence of studies was identified in Brazil, with six articles (42.8%), followed by the United States with four studies (28.5%).

There was incidence of stereotypes in 100% of the localized studies, the main ones being low status[12-20], careerist[12,14,16,20-23], angel of mercy[14,24] subordination to medicine[13-17,25]. Regarding the evidence of stereotypes of the 14 included documents, 57.1% showed low incidence of negative stereotypes, 35.7% high incidence of negative stereotypes and 7.2% did not find negative stereotypes. It is noteworthy that five (5) studies (35.7%) used samples of high school students[12-16], and four (4) studies (28.6%) analyzed the image of nursing in the media or with professionals working in the media[17,22,23,25].

Of the 14 included studies, four (4) of them (28.6%) described strategies for improving the image of nursing today, such as increasing the exposure of the profession in the media, and 2 included studies (14.3%) discussed the influence of the image of nursing in the recruitment of future nurses. All studies described and analyzed the image of nursing and highlighted the negative impact of stereotypes on the profession. Most of the authors considered that society present nursing as a profession of great invisibility, little appreciation, subordination to medicine, and mostly made of women who are underpaid.

As in a previous study, there was an incidence of negative stereotypes such as low status and subordination to medicine. However, positive stereotypes such as careerist, showing qualities such as competence, intelligence, efficiency, professionalism and empathy had a higher incidence (50%) in the studies. In addition, 64.3% of studies reflected low or no negative stereotypes. It therefore may be suggested that there has been a gradual improvement of the image of nursing over the 6-year under investigation.

In the five studies conducted with high school students, it was observed that the perspective of students about nursing is marked by ignorance of the of the autonomy of nurses[12-14], possibilities of the profession[13,15] of professional actions[13,16] and the students also identified nurses as being assistant and submissive to physicians[12-16].

This context is worrying in the sense that ignorance of the profession may lead students to choose other careers, or to drop out of nursing programs as soon as they enter, making it difficult to recruit professionals for nursing. In addition, current studies point to a significant recruitment deficit and shortage of nursing professionals available in the global labor market. From this perspective, improving the image of nursing is also about solving a global problem[16,23].

Most of the included studies used a qualitative approach. This makes sense when considering that qualitative studies seek to understand a phenomenon in depth and its construction in society. These studies, based on pattern identification, allow comparison, although it is not their primary objective[26]. Thus, it is observed that most studies have the phenomenon of stereotypes in the image of nursing as an object of study and comparisons over time allow us to see evidence about these stereotypes.

Considering the initial number of articles, it is not yet possible to generalize the data because the number of studies remains small. Problems with the social image of nurses have historical roots that are difficult to resolve, and they are primarily due to the way in which each culture builds gender relations and the empowerment of the feminine. Some studies in different cities and periods may indicate that the image is being updated, but still at a slow pace.

For example, in a study conducted in a city in the interior of Brazil in the 1960s, among a ranking of occupations, individuals ranked nursing below all college-level professions[27]. Almost four decades later, a study conducted in the same city with high school students identified nursing in 8th place in a ranking of 14 university occupations[16].

In 2018, the Nursing Now Campaign was launched. It is a global campaign, in partnership with the International Council of Nursing, the World Health Organization and The Burdett Trust for Nursing, it is sponsored by the Duchess of Cambridge and includes 30 countries. The program is based on the findings of the Triple Impact Report which concluded: Empowering nurses improves health, gender equity

and economies globally[28]. The campaign also warns of global problems that will require an increase in the number of nurses. These include the rise of chronic conditions, climate change, and migration. It is estimated that by 2030 we will need 9 million more nurses and midwives worldwide and that the shrinking health workforce is a major concern for the future. In the case of nursing, the situation is hampered by professional devaluation, and preventing these professionals from showing their potential as a whole[28-35].

It highlights the importance of directive actions to awaken students to choose a career in nursing. However, studies about students' image of the profession are fundamental, so that marketing and enlightenment actions are focused on the needs of each group, saving financial resources, time and designing more effective and personalized strategies[16].

There are still few published studies that indicate educational intervention strategies, but creative strategies have also been identified, such as building a website about nurses' fields of activity. In a study using this strategy, researchers observed that before the intervention (nursing website navigation) students mentioned negative stereotypes of low status and subordination to medicine. However, after the educational intervention, positive stereotypes were reported mentioning qualities such as autonomy, the scientific character of the profession and recognition of different areas of practice. In the same vein, the importance of the media and its influence on the perpetuation of negative stereotypes attributed to nursing for society as a whole is highlighted. The mass media have traditionally represented nursing through characters characterized by the stereotype of subordination to the medical field and within the hospital and care system[14,17,25].

One of the studies points out the possible causes of this reality by analyzing the nursing image with communication professionals. These professionals were unaware of the areas of work in nursing. The authors warn that if there is to be professional recognition and greater visibility in the media, nursing organizations must disseminate reliable information to communication professionals in order to influence what is then presented in the media[17].

In a study about the image of nursing on Google images site, the authors used the word female nurse and male nurse, in Portuguese. The use of the word nurse in its male form showed adequacy with the representation of the reality of professional nursing. Male nurses were depicted with uniforms that were mostly modern uniforms, stethoscopes, clipboards, surgical caps, and pens. Using the same search, but with the word in its female version (female nurse), almost half of the first results disseminated the stereotype of the nurse as a sex symbol, a fact that could hinder the proper search for information about the profession by students[36].

An image of nursing permeated by negative stereotypes affects the way politicians view the profession and may affect the financing of nursing services and resources[23].

Given this, it is noted that it is essential that nurses join efforts in order to collectively build a more participative and active profession in public, social and institutional policy decisions, thus contributing to the construction of a new image that reflects the true value of nursing for society. In addition, directive actions should be carried out in order to transform the social image of nursing, so that nurses are recognized for the valuable work they provide to society.

It is necessary for the phenomenon to continue to be studied and for intervention actions to be designed, evaluated, and encouraged.

CLOSING REMARKS

There was continuity of evidence of negative stereotypes in society, in nursing research, during the period studied. However, the expansion of positive stereotypes, such as careerist, considered beneficial for nurses' image was also evidenced. The study has as limitation, the small number of studies, which does not allow a generalization, despite the large number of studies located by the keywords.

In addition, for a better analysis of the studies, a better standardization of the keywords used or better defined methodologies would be recommended, as many studies located in the first phase were not about the subject, which would require policies on better indexing and use of descriptors.

These stereotypes about the profession mostly refer to the history of nursing and its evolution, and although they occurred in historical periods already surpassed by science, they remain in the social imagination, causing anachronism, and making the recognition and appreciation of this profession

difficult to achieve. It is understood that the image of nurses influences their professional practice, so it is necessary to study stereotypes, so that it is possible to develop strategies to increase the recognition and credibility of the profession.

More studies need to be carried out on the public image of nursing and on measures that can contribute to change this reality, using well-described methodologies, since the scientific production on the subject is small, especially since it is a very relevant and important subject that has influence on professional practice. In this sense, evaluating the evolution of evidence about stereotypes is an important strategy for evaluating the nurse's image and its evolution over time.

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