

THE CONCEPT “NURSING” IN GREECE: A FOCUS GROUP APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: There is a consensus among the international community about the importance of clarifying the meaning of “nursing” since it is believed that it influences the practice of nursing and its social status in different countries.

AIMS: To explore the concept of nursing in Greece through the perceived meaning of the word “nursing” among nurses and nursing students and to form a definition of the term “nursing”.

METHODOLOGY: Five focus groups were conducted, in Athens, Thessaloniki, and in smaller cities situated in rural regions of Northern and Western Greece. Each discussion lasted from 90 to 120 minutes; they were carried out in Greek language and were all audio-taped. At the beginning of each focus-group discussion, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation. Data were analysed using content analysis.

RESULTS: The majority of the participants were female (n=29, 85.29%), married (n=23, 67.65%), mean age 32.12 ± 11.9 (min 18, max 55). Five categories were emerged from the data analysis: 1) The practice of nursing, 2) Nursing as a profession or as a service, 3) Nursing as a branch of medicine, 4) Nursing as a science and an art, and 5) The social status of nursing. The deriving definition of nursing is: Nursing is a science and an art, a profession of relatively low social status and a service to the society. Nursing is the provision of care to patients with the aim of treatment and rehabilitation as well as, to families and populations. Nursing also includes psychological support, prevention, and health promotion.

Key-words: nursing science, art, nursing social status, nursing as a science and art.

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INTRODUCTION

It is not an easy endeavour to understand what exactly we mean by the word “nursing”. Nursing in our era is a science, an art, a combination of science and technical skills, as well as a profession. Nevertheless, if we try to investigate “How nursing is understood by the nurses themselves”, we will soon arrive at the conclusion that there is also diversity in the way in which nurses, from various places of the world, describe nursing. In addition, diversity also exists regarding how the meaning of the word nursing is understood in different societies.

Many nursing theories appeared in the 20th century, each one providing a different definition to the meaning and the content of nursing (Henderson 1969, Rogers 1970, Watson 1985, King 1987). Why however is the definition of nursing important? There is a consensus among the international community about the importance of clarifying the meaning of “nursing” since it is believed that it influences the practice of nursing and its social status in different countries (Bishop & Scudder 1996, Bradshaw 1998, Benner et al. 1999, Blais et al. 2002, Kahn & Fawcett 1995, Kim 1996, Meleis 1997, Casazza 2000, Fawcett 2000). Therefore, the

element of definition is important since it influences both the nurses and the provision of nursing care.

DEFINITIONS

The term “concept”

The term “concept” is stated in the Oxford Advanced learners Dictionary (Hornby 1974) as “idea underlying a class of things; general notion”.

The term “definition”

Plato in the book Menon (D 20-30, E 1-20) supports that in order for a definition to be considered satisfactory there has to be a specialization of the expression that defines the nature of the object without blending the common with the non-common characteristics and the extent of the defining expression should not be longer than the expression that is going to be defined.

In the Oxford Advanced learners Dictionary (Hornby 1974) the verb “define” is to “state precisely the meaning of (e.g. words)”; while the term “definition” is explained as “statement that defines”.

Definition of the term “nursing” in Greece

The Modern Greek State was established in 1831 and the first nursing school named “Nosokomikon Pedeftirion (nursing training institute)” was established in Athens in 1874, as a result of women’s movement and philanthropy by “The Society of Ladies for Women’s Education and Training” (Lanara 1978). However, the Greek term “nosileutiki (nursing)” is not mentioned in any official paper, instead the periphrasis “nosileia asthenon (patient care)” is used. The term “nosileia” is also found in the minutes of the First Conference (27-9-1923) of the administrative body of the Society of Greek Nurses (Lanara 1978).

It is worth mentioning that, especially after the '40s, some Greek nurses studied in nursing schools in England, the USA and Canada, and they replaced the term “nosileia asthenon” with the term “nosileutiki”. Therefore, the term was introduced into the Greek nursing terminology, even though it had not been introduced in any official state document, legal document or dictionary. There are personal testimonies by many nurses, who during the '50s and the '60s were nursing students, supporting that during their studies there was a wide use of the term “nosileutiki (nursing)”.

In the '60s, the term nursing made its first official appearance with the publication of M. Negreponi “To istorikon tis exelixeos tis nossileftikis apo archaiotaton chronon mechri to 1937”., which was a translation of A.E. Pavey’s book (1937) “The story of

the growth of nursing as an art, a vocation, and a profession” into Greek. The wide use of the term nursing during the '60s is also confirmed in the Proceedings of the First Pan-Hellenic Conference of the National Association of Graduate Greek Nurses (Proceedings of the 1st Pan-Hellenic Conference of E.S.D.N.E., 1960); the Conference’s topic was “New horizons in nursing”.

Definitions of Nursing in Contemporary Greece

Nevertheless, in contemporary Greece, the term nursing has not officially been clarified since the Hellenic Nurses Association (H.N.A.) adopts definitions of the International Council of Nurses (I.C.N.) and since it has never been attempted to provide a Greek definition of nursing which would reflect the Greek reality or the Greek nurses’ view of the meaning of nursing.

We also find a variety of definitions in the Greek nursing textbooks. In 1977, Lanara published a philosophical study entitled “Heroism and Nursing” in which nursing is defined as “... one of the most important missions, which is concerned with care, and which constitutes a combination of scientific knowledge, technical applications and humanistic behaviour. Nursing’s special responsibility comprises of the assurance of complete and individualized nursing care for the person, the family and the community”.

In 1979, Malgarinou and Kostantinidou published a book entitled “Nursing: basic principles of medical surgery” in which they mention that nursing “... is the work which deals with the care of the patient and aims at: 1. helping the patient to improve or attain his health, 2. helping the patient follow his therapeutic treatment as the doctor has specified, 3. relieving the patient from the disease’s symptoms, 4. helping the patient towards a peaceful ending, 5. helping the healthy person to maintain and improve his health and in this way to prevent disease”. While, in other nursing textbooks published in Greece, authors either state their own definitions of nursing or adopt the definitions of I.C.N. or of various foreign nursing theorists.

This lack of clarification of the term nursing is also demonstrated in Greek dictionaries (Tegopoulos & Fytrakis 1977, Babiniotis 2002) which mention nursing as being responsible for providing care only to patients and injured persons, while the phrase “... according to the instructions of the specialist doctors” deprives nursing of any scientific or professional autonomy.

The motive for launching this study was to clarify the concept and to define nursing based on the common understanding of Greek nurses and nursing students.

AIMS

The aims of this study were to explore the concept of nursing in Greece through the perceived meaning of the word "nursing" among nurses and nursing students and to form a definition of the term "nursing".

METHODOLOGY

In order to explore Greek nurses' and Greek nursing students' perceptions about the concept of nursing, five focus groups ($n=6+6+8+7+7=34$) were conducted. Qualitative research is designed to obtain in-depth responses about what people really know, think, and feel about a certain issue.

To assure the geographic representativeness of the sample, one focus group was conducted in Athens, the country's capital, one in Thessaloniki, the second in population city of Greece, and the other three in smaller cities situated in rural regions of Northern and Western Greece. Furthermore, for assuring population representativeness of the sample, the focus groups included students from different semesters and nurses with a variety of professional experience and educational qualifications.

The focus group discussions took place during February-May 2006. Each discussion lasted from 90 to 120 minutes. They were carried out in Greek language and were all audio-taped. Before starting the discussions, the participants were asked to fill out a short self-completion questionnaire which contained questions about demographic data. At the beginning of each focus-group discussion, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation. The participants were told that the discussions would be audio-taped and that names or other identifying information would be omitted from any written transcripts. The questions that were asked by the researcher during the focus-group discussions were the following:

1. Please, try to give a definition of nursing as you perceive it. What would you say to someone if he was asking "what is nursing?" so that he would

comprehend what we mean when we say "nursing"?

2. Is nursing a science? Why?
3. Is nursing an art? Why?
4. Do you believe that nursing has a social status?
5. What are the factors that have formed the social acceptance or non-acceptance of nursing?

In order to explore in depth the participants' perceptions of the concept of nursing, they were asked to express their opinion as fully and deeply as possible, until they had nothing more to say.

DATA ANALYSIS

The audiotapes of the focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim in Greek and the data were analyzed independently by two researchers using the method of qualitative content analysis.

RESULTS

The majority of the participants were female ($n=29$, 85.29%), married ($n=23$, 67.65%) and their mean age was 32.12 ± 11.9 (minimum age 18 maximum age 55). Regarding the educational qualification of the subjects, 8 were students of higher nursing education, 11 were Technological Educational Institution (higher nursing education) graduates, 8 were university graduates, 4 had an MSc, and 3 had a PhD.

The analysis resulted into the following categories about the content of the term "nursing": 1) The practice of nursing, 2) Nursing as a profession or as a service, 3) Nursing as a branch of medicine, 4) Nursing as a science and an art, and 5) The social status of nursing.

1) The practice of nursing

According to the participants, the everyday practice of nursing is expressed as provision of care, offering of health services, patient treatment, rehabilitation, or facing health problems. Furthermore, some of the participants mentioned psychological support, health promotion, prevention, and counseling.

Table 1. Examples of answers related to “the practice of nursing”

Provision of care

- «...nursing...the care of the human being that needs you...Γ5»
- «...care...deals with people’s diseases...Γ5»
- «...patient care...Γ1»
- «...offering of treatment and care to sick persons...Γ4»
- «...care towards a fellow human being who is in a hospital and suffers from some disease...Γ3»
- «care... taking care of a person who needs you Γ5»
- «... care, observation of the sick person... Γ5»

Offering of health services

- «...it focuses on offering services ... Γ4»
- «...offering services to persons, families and populations ... sick or healthy...Γ1»

Patient treatment

- «...it helps the patient recover and get well again... Γ3»
- «...patient treatment...physically as well as psychologically...Γ4»

Rehabilitation

- «...restoration of the patients’ health...G4»
- «...rehabilitation of invalid people...G4»

Facing health problems

- «...helping people face health problems is without dispute affair of nursing...Γ3»
- «...it is concerned with people’s health and with facing health problems...Γ3»

Psychological support

- «... psychological support of the patient...Γ5»
- «... psychological support of the family...Γ5»
- «...intervention... for psychological support...Γ4»

Prevention

- «...everything in nursing is related to prevention...Γ1»
- «...nursing deals with the healthy person when it comes to prevention...Γ2»
- «...it aims at contributing to prevention...Γ3»

Health promotion - Counselling

- «...gives advices... for better health...rules for hygiene...nutrition, exercise...Γ2»
- «...with teaching...health promotion... Γ2»

2) Nursing as a profession or as a service

Regarding the nature of nursing in the field of practicing nursing, the participants expressed two views. Some of the participants understand nursing as a profession and others as a service, while some

others believe that nursing is both a profession and a service.

Table 2. Examples of answers related to “nursing as a profession or as a service”

Profession

«...it is a caring profession...Γ1»,

«...nursing is a profession that aims at preparing people to deal with care...Γ4»,

«...it is a profession which mostly deals with the human being...Γ3»,

«...it is a difficult and pestiferous profession, which demands everyday all of you. It is a profession in which you can and you should offer all that you have...Γ4»,

Service

«...nursing due to its humanistic nature is considered to belong in the category of those professions that are characterized as services...Γ4»

«...after all nursing is a service...Γ3»,

«...it is wrong to consider it a profession... it is a service...Γ4»

Profession and service

«...profession...but you can also say that it is a service...Γ3»

3) Nursing as a branch of Medicine

Some of the participants, mostly nursing students, expressed the opinion that nursing is a branch of

medicine or that, even though it is a separate profession, it functions auxiliary to medicine.

Table 3. Examples of answers related to “nursing as a branch of Medicine”

Branch of medicine

«...it is a branch of medicine which offers care to patients...G2»,

«...it is a branch of medicine which aims at offering care... it is complementary to medicine... Γ2»,

«...it is (branch of medicine)... the medical knowledge is necessary in order to practice the profession ...Γ4».

Λειτουργεί βοηθητικά της ιατρικής

«...it is a separate profession...however things get entangled...doctors give the instructions and nurses carry them out...Γ2»

«...nursing is the doctor’s right hand...it helps the doctor...Γ2»,

4) Nursing as a science or an art

The participants expressed different opinions about whether nursing is a science or not. There were

different opinions about the scientific nature of nursing as well as, about the degree to which it is a science, an art, or a combination of both.

Table 4. Examples of answers related to “nursing as a science or as an art”

Science

«...it is science...you should study in order to get the necessary knowledge...Γ3»

«...there are nursing theories therefore, it is a science... Γ1»

«...Nursing could become or tends to be science....The important thing is that, no matter where it belongs, the people practicing it are characterised by humane behaviour in combination with knowledge, concepts inextricable from science, thus it might even be science, but not for the public...Γ4»

«...I would characterise it as an applied humanistic and humane science...Γ1»

«...yes it is a science...in order to establish its theories and the way in which it implements them...it uses scientific data...Γ4»

«...it is science...its characteristic is its composite character...apart from the purely nursing knowledge framework....it borrows knowledge from other sciences...and it composes its complete knowledge framework...Γ4»

Art

«...it is art...a good nurse needs craftsmanship in order to execute his duties...Γ2»

«...It is art because it needs techniques...Γ3»

«...it is certainly an art because nursing is about treatment and generally taking care of a person... it needs art otherwise a person with a broken arm could come here and leave with a broken leg... just because of wrong handling...Γ4»

Both science and art

«...how can it not be art since it is applied science...we will be theorizing while people are in pain and dying?...Γ1»

«...it is a science but certainly also an art...communication, support, treatment, giving a bath and generally taking care of a person, even putting a needle in a vein is an art...Γ4»

5) The social status of nursing

In relation to nursing's social acceptance, the participants seem divided. Some answer positively, supporting that there is social acceptance; while there were also a lot of negative answers expressing that they feel misunderstood by the public, and they

believe that their profession is under-appreciated, and there is no social acceptance by the wider society. In addition, the participants explained the factors which contribute to the social acceptance or non-acceptance.

Table 5. Examples of answers related to “the social status of nursing”

Problems with social acceptance

«...it has some social acceptance...Γ3»

«...even though things are not as good as they should be.... I believe that it has better social acceptance than in the past...Γ5»

«...at the village...they appreciate them (nurses)...Γ2»

«...it doesn't have big social acceptance, usually in the world outside the hospital the predominant opinion is that nurses are only for taking care of the patients' hygiene...Γ4»

«...I believe it is good...some though think that nurses exist only to clean the patients...they consider it a dirty profession...in the future things will change...Γ2»

«...in the city it (social acceptance) is not high at all...Γ2»

«...there is no social acceptance by the people outside the hospital... they consider us servants...Γ4»

«...the only social acceptance that we receive is the acceptance by the patient...Γ4»

«...none...only among nurses there is social acceptance...Γ1»

Factors that contribute to positive social acceptance

«...the educational level of nurses and of the society has improved...Γ3»

«...the nurse has better behaviour and better level of knowledge... Γ3»

«...nurses' educational level has improved...Γ3»

«...now there is knowledge, theory...Γ4»

Factors that contribute to negative social acceptance

«... people don't know how many years nurses study... they think that they study 2 years...Γ2»

«...there is a bias...Γ1»

«...there are many women in this profession...Γ1»

«...there are many different levels of education...Γ3»

«...it is a matter of people's culture...Γ1»

«...some historic events in Greece have formed a social status which cannot be easily changed any more...Γ5»

«...it will really get a good status, when they (nurses) get the right to prescribe medication...Γ1»

DISCUSSION

The present study, due to its qualitative nature, has contributed to the identification of significant issues related to the clarification of the concept of "nursing" as perceived by Greek nurses and Greek nursing students. Although the findings cannot be generalised, they do point toward opportunities for gaining a greater and more in depth understanding of the topic.

It appears that the concept of nursing has for the participants a multidimensionality and it includes issues included in the official definitions provided by nursing associations and organizations (I.C.N. 2003, A.N.A. 1995).

Nursing is perceived by the participants as a provision of care and health services for recovery and treatment as well as, for rehabilitation; it also includes psychological support, prevention, health education, and help towards the patients in order to

face health problems. Similar results are reported by Sapountzi-Krepia et al. (2007) in a study on a nursing population from Northern Greece.

Caring is the core component of nursing and traditionally nurses provide care to people who do not have the physical or mental ability to care for themselves (Morisson 1997). Moreover, caring, according to Roach (1992), is seen as a human mode of being that is uniquely included in professional caring. Rovithis (2002) argues that nursing, in its history, preserved caring although, care varies according to societal events and needs. In addition, Calman (1993) supports that care is based on underlying values which influence the carers. Regarding the psychological support, prevention, and health education which are stated by the participants as components of nursing, Rovithis' (2002) statement that nurses while practicing nursing "... focus on the unique nature of the human

as an interactive whole of needs, knowledge, wills, emotions, and feelings..." helps us understand better the issues raised by the participants.

Nursing is described by the participants as a science, or art, or combination of both. Nursing, as an applied science, combines those two characteristics. Nightingale (1859) in her writings characterised nursing as an art and, although, many things have changed in nursing since then, the art is a component that has been preserved in the core of nursing. As Rovithis (2002) argues, a constant debate has arisen about the nature of nursing as an art or science or a combination of both, and similar issues can also be found in other sciences. Nursing was appointed a scientific status in Greece in 1979, much later than in the U.S.A. and other European countries, when the Nursing Department of the University of Athens was established (Sapountzi-Krepia 2004).

It is a surprising finding that nursing is perceived by nursing students as a branch of medicine. The issue that nursing should become a profession in its own right and not a branch of medicine was advocated by Nightingale about 150 years ago and contemporary nursing is worldwide considered as a science and art of its own (Malpas 2006). That is a sign for nursing educators that they have to try harder to clarify such issues for the students. However, we think that more research is needed on this specific topic.

Nursing is characterized by some of the participants as a caring, difficult, and pestiferous profession, which is concerned with the human being; while others characterized it as a service ("leitourgima"). In Greece, the term "leitourgima" describes a service that is beneficial for the society (Tegopoulos & Fytrakis 2002). Sapountzi-Krepia et al. (2007) have also found similar results.

The social status of nursing is described in a problematic way, although the participants stress that the profession's social status is better than it was in the past. Some of the participants believe that the educational level of the contemporary nurse contributes to the improvement of the nurse's social acceptance. On the other hand, they mention social stereotypes, the fact that nursing is a women's profession and that nursing has no autonomy in practice, as barriers towards the improvement of its social status.

CONCLUSION

The present study is the first one in Greece investigating the concept and the definition of nursing in the country. The findings contribute to the clarification of the concept of nursing and help form a contemporary definition of nursing through the participants' perceptions.

The deriving definition of nursing is: Nursing is a science and an art, a profession of relatively low social status and a service to the society. Nursing is the provision of care to patients with the aim of treatment and rehabilitation as well as, to families and populations. Nursing also includes psychological support, prevention, and health promotion.

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Figure 1. Categories and codes of nursing definition

