

White uniform's meanings for nursing teachers

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Abstract

The uniform can be understood as a symbol which represents the individual's occupation in society and in the institution where he works. Nursing, since its early days, is a profession which demands the wearing of a uniform. Nursing schools, traditionally, are in charge of indicating the wearing of uniform, informing this clothing's symbolic importance for the profession. The present paper aims at analyzing the uniform's meanings revealed by nursing teachers at a high school and nursing technician course, in a school located in the North Zone of São Paulo, Brazil. This qualitative research with semi structured interviews and participant observation with nursing teachers. The results showed that there are meanings that update traditional values related to the profession, the feminine gender, professional identity and the association between uniform and painful experiences.

1. Introduction

As Sarti^[1] states, "Although translated and subjectively apprehended, the meaning of every human experience is always historically and culturally elaborated, and is transmitted through socialization, initiated at birth and renewed throughout life". In this perspective here adopted, the senses attributed to all lived experiences are considered to have roots in the culture in which the individual is inserted. These socially elaborated senses also include the perception of the objects that surround them, many of which with outstanding symbolic importance.

In this text seeks to focus on the meanings built on one of these specific objects, the nursing uniform. It is about the apprehension of these meanings expressed by nurses and nursing teachers at a technical school of secondary level, in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. This text is discussed the professionals' perception of the uniform, which also express their relationship with the practice and experience in this area of expertise.

According to Benjamin's^[2] discussion, "the way in which human visual perception is organized, the medium in which it occurs, is not only conditioned naturally, but also historically".

At work, wearing a uniform reveals the professional identity of a particular group within the society to which it belongs. In general, according to Adam and Herzlich^[3], "the 'professionals' are distinguished from other jobs by a high level of theoretical and specialized training and a 'service orientation' for the population that corresponds to idea of 'vocation'". The nurse's uniform is indicative of his education, this vocation and his orientation for serving the population.

It can also indicate status, the indication of a function related to the health area, especially medicine, hierarchically more valued in Western society^{[3][4]}. As developed by Adam and Herzlich^[3], "Medicine has gained full authority over the disease and has acquired a monopoly on its treatment". Inserted in a field of

power relations, ^[5] nursing and other health professions work in a field of tension that differences related to gender ^[6], professional category and position matter. Concerning specifically professional category and position, the uniform shows hierarchical differences, also influencing the behavior of the agents who wear it. This is quite evident in the health field, according to its operating logic.

A logic that is underpinned by technical-scientific principles and a biomedical rationality.^[4] In reference to the health field, the training of professional nurses is also guided by this logic, by reference to actions that are supported by 'technical-scientific security'. This logic, then, guides health practices and is seen by health professionals as being "natural" to the profession. This results from a professional training process and, through it, the incorporation of certain practices and values.

The training of nursing professionals' comprehension, which includes the wearing of white uniforms and the naturalization of practices within the health field, is helped, in this article, by some key concepts, with emphasis on the one of *habitus*, social field ^[7,8] and professional identity ^[9].

The *habitus* indicates behavior in a given circumstance; it can be understood as a set of perceptions, dispositions, to feeling, to doing, and acting in a certain way, in a given circumstance. Thus, becoming a teaching nurse is incorporating, throughout training and work experience, a specific professional *habitus*.

This *habitus* is acquired through social interaction and, at the same time, are the classifier and organizer of this interaction. The nurse's uniform is understood as a 'piece' that makes up the professional *habitus*, being part of the symbolic representation of the nursing profession.

Although this garment has a double unifying and fitting purpose, the individual attributes different meanings to work uniforms, that result from his relationships and lived experiences, the social web of which crossings and overlapping are part. The representations attributed by nursing teachers to the uniform at the aforementioned technical school bring revealing elements about the profession, teaching and practice, personal and professional experiences, also marked by tensions, biographical reorganizations and contradictions.

2. Materials and methods

This article results from a qualitative research, developed in a public high school and technical school, located in the North of the city of São Paulo-Brazil. The research techniques consisted of interviews based on a semi-structured script and on participant observation of teachers working in the classroom. For the proper conduction of participant observation, the disciplines that dealt more directly with the "pain" theme were chosen, that is, those whose approach of the syllabus to be taught involved pain, among which stand out "Medical-Surgical Clinic", "Urgency and Emergency" and "Intensive Care Unit".

From a universe of 23 teachers who were part of the teaching staff of the technical course in nursing, 12 teaching nurses were interviewed. The inclusion criterion was the verification of a period of at least three years of assistance. The reason for this criterion was to focus on professionals who had experience, in working time, as a teaching and assisting nurse.

It is present below the profile of the interviewed professionals: to age, sex and professional training. The group of teachers interviewed was composed of 12 subjects, 11 women and one man. As for the age group, there was a variation from 26 to 62 years. Most professionals are between 31 and 50 years old and

the rest belong to the age group of 26 to 30 years old. In relation to training, from twelve nurses interviewed, one holds a Master in Public Health and eleven nurses hold a specialization in Teaching and a second specialization, namely: ICU, Urgency and Emergency, Mental Health / Psychiatry, Orthopedics and Oncology.

The research has been submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Arts, Sciences and Humanities (SASH) of the University of São Paulo, approved under protocol No. 2823856. All the research subjects were instructed on the objectives of the study and on the voluntary and confidential character of their participation. Their agreement was registered with the signing of the Free and Informed Consent Form.

The field research, which included interviews and participant observation at the referred state high school and technical nursing school, located in the northern zone in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, took place over a period of six consecutive months, from April to December, 2017. The data were analyzed and interpreted in the light of the theoretical framework of this work.

3. Discussion

3.1 *The uniform meanings by the first nursing schools*

The nursing uniform composed an image that has become eternalized worldwide. As described by Peres and Padilha^[10], the nurse's image is marked, in addition to other characteristics, by the clothing dressed during the nursing practice, which has been immortalized in global iconography, allowing us to identify the wearing of accessories such as the apron, the veil and the cap.

In Brazil, the authors point out that the nurse's religious image, associated with the institution, was established in the 19th century, "with emphasis on the Sisters of Charity of São Vicente de Paulo"^[10].

The effective entry of a professional nursing model into Brazilian society, competing with the religious model, occurred with the creation of the Anna Nery School (EAN) in 1923, when the National Department of Public Health (DNSP) invested in the establishment of the Anglo-American model of nursing teams to support the development of the recently implemented Health Reform. (...) In the first half of the 20th century, the uniform determined by the EAN started to characterize the nurse model constituted according to the Anglo-American standard, later known as the Anna Nery standard^[10].

Santos^[11], discussing the influence of the American model on nursing education, between 1928 and 1938, highlights that in the students' socialization process, rigid moral values "(...)were intentionally inculcated, guided by the principles of hierarchy and discipline, aiming at bringing about a radical change in the habitus of candidates for the new profession."^[11]

Nursing schools have always been in charge of imposing the wearing of uniforms on their students, as well as informing the symbolic importance of this clothing for the profession. Peres and Padilha^[10] discuss this aspect, highlighting that with the organization of the EAN, the wearing of uniforms was implemented by North American nurses as one of the strategies to maintain institutional discipline, which made it possible to identify the students in their different stages of the course, as well as the nurses / teachers according to their area of expertise, differentiating them from other nursing workers and characterizing the female nurse of high intellectual and moral standard, who also stood out for her specific clothing^[10].

The wearing of uniforms in nursing education, despite done in a specific way by an existing category

in that profession, predicts a training based on respect and a status based on scientific technical knowledge, also relating to the professional's ability to provide treatment and cure. At the same time, its wearing reveals tensions, among which the high responsibility the uniform also expresses.

3.2 Uniform versus identity (re)construction: some assumptions

Seeking to analyze the white uniform's meaning for teachers at a high school and nursing technician course, we propose to apprehend the perspective of these professionals on the uniform, in this profession. For so, we use the analytical category of social representation because it is the one that best meets the perspectives apprehension. "Social representations are dynamic sets, their characteristic is the production of behaviors and relationships with the environment, it is a relationship that modifies both and not a reproduction of those behaviors or those relationships, nor a reaction to a given stimulus."^[12] Social representations "are modalities of knowledge used for communication and understanding of the social context."^[13]

The reports collected from the interviewees reveal ambiguities in the representations on the white uniform. There is an expression of positive meanings that show pride for the profession, at the same time that elements which reveal pain and anguish are brought about by their memories and lived experiences as nursing professionals. The professional identity is built in that same duality, in difficult experiences considered painful and full of anguish, and in reconfigurations of oneself, in identity reconfiguration, as shown by some statements that highlight the bet on teaching exercise at the expense of patient care, which diversifies, not without tension, the construction of identities related to nursing work.

The current diversification of identities is discussed by Dubar^[9]. The individual participation in different social fields and the diversity of positions that the individual can occupy in them make the differentiation of identities grow even more. Currently, the author assesses, there is a strong differentiation of identities at the expense of the development of a unique type of individuality. This differentiation occurs according to multiple possible combinations between different logics of activities, "forms of power and cultural levels". The consistency of these combinations must be given by each individual, which is done not without tension.

The author claims that the modern world, in its capitalist context, imposes to the individual the requirement that each one make his own choices, and then there is a conversion of identities previously inherited according to a community orientation to identity differentiations, the result of voluntary choices of individuals in a variety of fields in life. At the same time relationships and identifications tend to be unstable, in contrast to the security and stability of community identifications. Once in crisis, uncertain and unstable, the identifications will be centered on an individual construction work for oneself. These constructions concern both professional and personal life, given, for example, by new family compositions and lifestyles.^[9]

In this process, individuals are constituting themselves, in the relationship with others, selecting "certain roles more than others"^[9] in a process of identity transformation that is related to the revision and reinterpretation of their biography.

This is particularly important for nursing teachers, especially for those than define their identities, previously focused on care work, and see themselves now as teachers, seeking to disconnect themselves

from the activity previously performed and which relies on the uniform, whose wearing is mandatory, the materialization of a painful memory they wish to erase. The uniform is a reminiscence of experienced situations nowadays seen as painful; it reminds us of an identity which is reconfigured, as well as its subjectivity is reconfigured in the exercise of its work and of the relationships developed through it.

The uniform is one of the markers of professional identity. Through it, the individual highlights his belonging to the occupied category, which is important for his professional identification process. At the same time, this identity is also built by the experiences lived wearing this uniform. Conceived as an important object of the nurse's professional identity, the uniform also carries both the profession's historical marks, as well as each of the professionals' experiences along their trajectory. Its image is inserted in a system of meanings constituted both by the formation and by the experience of each professional, this one also constituted by the social representations about the profession.

In order to ponder the meanings attributed to the uniform by the teaching nurses, we rely on Benjamin^[2] and his considerations about objects. As the author points out, objects "are inserted in a system of meanings that must be seen as elements articulated with each other in the field of human activities, that is, as systems pervaded by the dimensions of the 'unthinkable' and the 'invisible' that support it."^[2]

3.3 Uniform and professional identity

Among some interviewees, the speeches about the uniform show its importance as a symbol of professional identity, both in teaching and in care practice: "*When I wear my work clothes, it is in fact when I feel like a nurse, it is as if that outfit incorporated the nurse who exists within myself, awakening a way of speaking and doing the things that are typical of this profession*" (X).

The relationship between clothing and professional identity in nursing is discussed by Dubar^[9]. According to the author, the nursing uniform is, for the nursing profession, a symbol which contributes to the process of conceiving the institutional, social and professional identity of the class. This symbolism and its representation begin in the professional training, shaping it over the individual's years of work. The uniform impregnates the professional's attitude in each of his acts, which are guided, in the work environment, by a set of premises related to the profession. The uniform's white color holds important historical meanings, including hygiene and purity, which are constantly updated in professional practice. The following statement brings out this idea, showing the importance of the uniform, in this case, the white coat and the badge, in professional practice: "*In order to teach or even answer this interview, I need to put on the white coat and the badge, without them I don't feel like a teacher.*" (Y).

Clothing reveals attributes and characteristics of the person wearing it (...). Clothes have their own language and communicate about the sex, age and social class of those who wear them and can also provide important information regarding the person's work, origin, personality, tastes and mood at that time.^[14]

When referring to a profession, the uniform is part of the professional *habitus*. *Habitus* is defined by Bourdieu^[7] as the system of unconscious dispositions, as a geometric place of objective determinisms and of a determination of the objective future and subjective hopes, tends to produce practices, and in this way, careers objectively adjusted to objective structures.

The wearing of the uniform and the badge are part of a practice in the field of nursing, a common

practice among its agents who incorporate it in such a way that its wearing immediately identifies them with their profession. Thus, the practice defined, among other provisions, by the wearing of the uniform and the badge, constitutes a *habitus*. This pattern of behavior, the wearing of the uniform to teach nursing classes, shows ways of being in the profession of an entire group that occupies the same position in the field. Thus, for a group of nursing teachers, wearing a uniform is part of an internalized practice that defines a way of being.

Some other statements also show the uniform's importance in the how these professionals work in nursing. The wearing of the uniform is a practice that is part of the incorporation of the professional *habitus*. In this case, work clothes embody the *habitus*; it is related to working, just as work is related to the uniform. It is as if the uniform's fabric reconfigured both body and identity, becoming part of the individual who wears it while exercising the profession. As another interviewee says: "when I wear my work clothes, it is in fact when I feel like a nurse", showing the correspondence between the uniform and the profession.

The uniform's white color is also an important element of meaning and professional identity Silva.^[14] refers to this aspect considering the importance of the white color's symbolic meaning. As the author states, the symbolic meaning of the white color has been constructed and reconstructed throughout history. In ancient civilizations, the white color was related to divinity and wisdom. Later, other meanings were added to this color, such as: hygiene, clarity, energy exchange and retention of solar energy." It could also be seen as negative indications, making environments dull, lifeless, and leading to dispersion."^[15]

The uniform has symbolic value and moral significance, and, in this sense, indicates the responsibilities of the wearer, given the position it occupies in its field of action. Thus, the consequences of the professionals' attitudes can always fall on the group to which the individual belongs. The uniform works as a disciplinary element that requires the person who wears it to behave coherently with the group and the institution he stands for.^[9]

3.4 We are like angels: devotion and its updating in nursing

The following speech shows the uniform's meaning for the interviewee:

I put on my white uniform and feel like I am someone else, my thoughts about my life and my home are outside, I surrender to the profession, for this reason nursing has no sex, we are like angels, or we should be, it was something my teachers would always say (Z).

The uniform characterizes an exemplary conduct, symbolizing spiritual, moral and professional virtues such as humility, competence, selflessness and altruism. Teachers and nurses were identified and differentiated by their uniform. White, in addition to representing cleanliness, carries spiritual symbolism, being considered "the color of light, purity and perfection."^[16]

The uniform's representation of some interviewees reveals the basis of the principles inherited by their professional training, which last throughout their career. The importance attributed to the uniform by the teacher above is also associated with expectations related to the female gender, to its association with care, seen as something "natural". This conception is linked, on the one hand, to the valuation that the profession given to women at the beginning of their professionalization. The nursing profession at that time represented an "open door" for its economic independence and some respect from society. Even nowadays, it is a profession that mainly concerns women.

On the other hand, gender expectations have historically linked nursing care to a “natural gift” of women. Rohden^[17] in a study on the creation, in the 19th century, of gynecology in Brazil, reveals the existing concern with the difference between the sexes expressed in moral discourses of medicine on the role of women, which was previously defined by biology.

It is from this perception of the feminine, from the naturalization of certain characteristics considered proper to the women’s “nature”, that the idea of maternal care is linked to the figure of women, with regard to their “natural abilities”.

The intensity with which the medical speeches set out to speak of the differences based on “nature” shows how indispensable they seemed in that context. On this basis it was described as natural that doctors created prescriptions relating to the social functions of both men and women.^[17]

In another paper which discusses sexuality and gender in medicine, Rohden^[6] shows how certain behaviors and perceptions of both doctors and patients are associated with gender differences. The author refers to a survey conducted in North American hospitals which shows that no other variable than gender influenced the attitude of those surveyed. One of these highlighted results shows that "patients tend to think that doctors are more 'human' and considerate, devoting more time to listening to patients and taking longer in consultations."^[6] Another statement shows that patients used to interrupt women more frequently when talking to professionals than when they were discussing with a male doctor. This type of behavior, evaluates the author, can only be explained by the attributes that are socially assigned to men and women, and that inspire different attitudes in doctors and patients in relation to people of the same or opposite gender.^[6]

These attributes, considered as “female” ones, such as being more human and more caring, and which inform both health professionals and patients, interfering in how they relate to each other, are also expected in professions in which there are traditionally more women than men.

Historically, nursing is a priority category for women. When resuming its socio-historical aspects, it can be said that nursing is born as a service organized by Catholic religious institutions and the female figure is not at the center of this service. It is a woman who takes care of children, the sick and the elderly.^[18] The professionalization process in nursing begins with Florence Nightingale and the use of the uniform so becomes mandatory.^[19] Thus, a female nurse enters the world of work, wearing a costume that symbolizes respect and dignity, attributes that she needs to show in a society economically dominated by men.

Caponi^[19] also makes reference to the idea, developed within nursing, of the nurse's association with devotion and submission. From Florence Nightingale onwards, the consecrated woman will be replaced by the professional nurse. She will no longer have a religious character, however, the assistance provided will continue to be considered as a bond that supposes and reinforces submission.^[19]

Before Florence, there was what the author called "consecrated woman". For this “consecrated woman - the charity lady who precedes the professional nurse”, there was “an almost sacred status. They were recognized as having divine gifts for their actions, their alms, their assistance, which made them benefactors.”^[19]

These almost sacred attributes end up being updated in nursing practice. As the interviewee pondered, one commits herself to the profession, for this reason nursing does not have sex, they are like angels, or they should be. And it is under the condition of angel, of devotion, that the interviewee perceives her performance in the profession. A devotion that supplants perception, sexual differences, making everyone

equal in nursing. As she points out, when putting on the white uniform, she leaves out thoughts about her life and home, giving herself totally to the profession. The uniform gives rise to this identity transformation and, as the interviewee points out, at that moment, she feels that she is someone else; she feels that she is an angel, as her teachers taught her.

This perception of devotion and sublimation through the profession results from a socialization process that includes the learning of certain values which are incorporated throughout professional training. A process of education that is partly intentional, but which also has an unintentional part, referring, to a large extent, to the observation of teachers' practices and discourses concerning the profession. A learned and incorporated devotion is not always free from unpleasantness. Some interviewees highlighted great disgust with the practice of assistance and, associated with it, with the uniform, resulting in a redefinition of identity and biographical review.

3.5 The uniform as a reminder of pain and the choice for teaching

“I prefer to teach nursing in theory, going to the field means wearing a white uniform again... this uniform brings painful memories to me” (J).

At work the nurse always wears a uniform, a white uniform. As the interviewee says, going to the field means wearing a white uniform again. However, wearing this uniform brings her back memories of pains suffered in her professional exercise; makes her live again, as a reminder, the pains experienced in professional practice – “this uniform brings me painful memories”, she ponders. The uniform immediately recalls a professional practice that the interviewee no longer wants to remember. Work clothes / uniforms can be interpreted here as a kind of scar, obtained during professional practice. Although the memories do not depend on the wearing of the uniform, it brings them out, as if looking at the uniform would make the past and painful memories return. In this case, the uniform has a negative meaning for the interviewee, marking an experience she wants to forget, classified by the professional as a painful memory.

In modern Western societies, medicine has an authority over disease and a monopoly over its treatment^[3]. There is a set of practices that cover the ritual of a consultation and have great symbolic importance, both for the professional and for the patient. The whole ritual of medical consultation - looks, gestures, questions, white clothing - is of enormous symbolic importance. The patient's - and doctor's - belief in the powers of medicine is a powerful ally in any circumstance.^[4]

The white uniform worn by the doctor and also by nurses and other health professional categories is part of a set of ritualistic practices. It's wearing, at the beginning, in the first anatomy classes, works as a kind of rite of passage, integrating the student into the community of that profession, which includes a set of values, codes and rules. When wearing a white uniform, the student recognizes himself and is recognized as an equal, belonging to that professional training environment. Over time, the professional habitus^[7] incorporates the white uniform, an outfit of great symbolic importance.

Van Gennep,^[20] in a classic study on the different rites of passage, brings the following consideration: [...] individual life consists of a succession of stages, with ends and beginnings of the same nature, namely, birth, social puberty, marriage, paternity, class progression, occupation specialization, death. Certain ceremonies whose object is identical are related to each of these sets, making an individual move from a specific situation to another equally determined situation.^[20]

In the health field, in the various professional categories, there is a set of situations that collectively mark the passage of the individual's entry into this new universe. The use of the white uniform can be considered, in many situations, as a rite of passage, a moment considered valuable and highly expected by students.

However, in professional practice, the same uniform that marks the entry into the profession can also mark, in the course of their exercise, the pains experienced by them, as the interviewee pointed out.

If, at the beginning of the career, the wearing of the uniform, as a rite of passage for entering the profession, has a positive meaning, belonging to the professional community, painful experiences lived during the practice, reorient the meaning of the uniform, now seen negatively. The uniform now means belonging to a certain area of the nursing profession, care for patients, which the interviewee no longer wants to access, as well as the pains that accompany it.

Thus, it is because she no longer wants to practice nursing care and sees painful memories in her uniform – the ones the interviewee wants to avoid-, that she then says “I prefer to teach nursing in theory”, since assistance brings the memory of a pain that wants to be left behind.

Starts from a theoretical framework^[21] that takes emotions as socio-cultural phenomena, and is not, therefore, given in itself, but a result of meanings shared collectively.

Despite its uniqueness for those who live and feel pain, their senses can be shared with others and this sharing highlights the social dimension of pain.

The states pain, like love, refers to a radically subjective experience^[1]. The one who feels the pain says “I know”. In the face of the other's pain, there is commotion, suffering (or even joy), with greater or lesser distance and intensity. Despite singular for those who feel it, pain, like any human experience, brings the possibility of being shared in its meaning, which is a collective reality (although we can never be sure that what we attribute to the other corresponds exactly to what he attributes to himself.^[1]

Taken from the context in which it is inscribed and from the situation assessment by the individual at a given time and place^[21], the pain can present positive meanings, referring to the idea of strength, courage and honor, making sense for those who live it and for the whole community that accompanies it. This is the case, for example, of societies in which initiation rites are carried out. These rites evidence the courage, bravery and belonging to the community in which the rite is performed. In this case, the pain is not only endured by the initiate, but is also seen by him and the community to which he belongs as something that has a sense of existence; that integrates him to the group, to its rules, which everyone also has already experienced, in their initiations, the same process, kept in the memory and marked on the body of each one of the initiates^[22].

During the initiation ritual for adulthood, the initiation or passage rite takes the body of the initiates as an object to record the rules of these societies. In this case, the pain needs to be tearing in order to be marked in memory and in the body. The laws of society, the author points out, will be inscribed on the body of each of its members. This pain has an important sense of aggregation, not only the pain, but the marks left on the body that are its records. The body that society designates as the only propitious space to contain the sign of a time, the trace of a passage, the determination of a destination. The body mediates the acquisition of knowledge and that knowledge is inscribed in the body through a process of laceration and pain that is faced without complaints of suffering by the young person who attributes meaning to the ritual

of his society.^[22]

Young people who enter adulthood through this ritual attribute to pain a positive meaning, belonging to the group they wish to be part of; they take part in the rite and do so keeping silence and, in some cases witnessed, even with tranquility. The scars imposed on the body are a permanent sign of this desire to belong.

Keeping the proper distances between societies and their cultural and historical context, it is possible to draw a parallel with the interviewee's speech, regarding the relationship established between pain, scar and belonging, which highlights the social character of pain in both contexts. It is not a matter of comparing the tearing pain experienced in the body of initiates in a ritual of passage into adulthood in societies without writing with the pain revealed by the interviewee when talking about her uniform. Rather, it is a matter of thinking about the place of this pain, less in its intensity and form than in its sense of existence. If, in the first case, of a society without writing, pain refers to a desired belonging, in the other, of the nursing professional, pain, which in addition to not being in relation to an allowed tearing of the body, as in the first case, is bonded precisely to an unwanted belonging, therefore, without a positive sense for the teacher. In this parallel that seeks to relate the triad pain, belonging and scarring, the nursing uniform acts as the skin of the initiate of society without writing, that skin where the pain is inscribed. In the case of the interviewee, this inscription is made through memory and the visualization of the object, the uniform, which brings the immediate association with the pains already experienced and unwanted. A pain that does not tear the flesh, but defines an important dimension of suffering for the teacher interviewed, when she refers to the uniform she stopped wearing in teaching activities.

Unlike the young man who, during the transition period, sees in the scars the positive meaning and belonging to the community group, for nurses, work clothes represent pain and suffering, negative meaning, without the desire to belong to the professional group.

As another interviewee says, *“once I enjoyed that white uniform, nowadays I want distance from it, I don't even want to see it, much less wear it”* (W).

Thus, it is clear that the representation of the uniform is not static, undergoing changes related to the re-signification by the wearer, based on the experiences she has lived. As already noted, during the training period, the nursing student seems to have a positive representation of the profession, however, during the daily work, this representation is modified and often becomes negative and painful. This fact could be identified in the respondents' speeches that migrated from assistance to teaching, as it was conceived as a job that causes less anguish and pain.

Nowadays, it is not required by training centers that the nursing teacher wear a uniform and not even an apron to teach. The uniform is restricted only to classes in the nursing laboratory and in the hospital internship. However, in the present study, it was observed that some teachers claim to insist on wearing the uniform. In this case, the statement of the professional identification that the uniform provides is made explicit, whereas in other cases its removal even from memory is necessary, implying a reconfiguration of the professional doing itself.

4. Conclusion

The present study sought to reflect on the meanings of the uniform for nursing teachers at a technical high school in São Paulo, Brazil.

The apprehension of these meanings was based on observation of classes taught by nursing teachers and semi-structured interviews with these professionals. In these two moments, it was at central focus both the teaching and assistance practices, activities experienced by all those surveyed, taken as a trigger to talk about the uniform in the exercise of the profession. Positive meanings, associated with status, identity, and professionalism, clash other perceptions, sometimes of the same interviewee, showing the lived dubiousness that the uniform brought out. Among pains and identifications, the existence of meanings that revitalize traditional values related to the profession and the female gender has been highlighted; meanings related to professional identity and the association of the uniform with pain and painful experiences with the profession.

It is interesting to observe how the generational factor is related to the meanings attributed to the uniform. Thus, among professionals in the age group of 50-60, positive meanings related to status, respect, and dignity are highlighted. Professionals aged 20 to 31 associate the uniform with the pain and suffering experienced in the profession. The first group belongs to a generation in which the nursing uniform meant respect, status, and dignity, being associated with the possibility of entering the universe of work and the professionalization of women. Unlike the experiences of the former, younger professionals enter a job market that presents them with more opportunities, and they can exercise a profession that is now more consolidated. Perhaps because of that, positive values such as status, respect, and dignity, evidenced among the older ones when they talked about the uniform, are relativized by the former. These ones highlight the pains and sufferings when mentioning the meanings attributed to the uniform, since they associate it with an exhaustive, stressful job, in which the nurse is exposed to borderline situations of life and death and does not feel valued for the work she does in the society in which she lives and in the environment in which she works, as highlighted by the interviewees.

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