

## Power under Foucault's perspective and precariousness of nursing work

*O poder em Foucault e precarização do trabalho em enfermagem*

*El poder en Foucault y precarización del trabajo de enfermería*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to reflect on the precariousness of nursing work, taking as reference the philosophical perspective of Michael Foucault and his conceptions about power relations. **Content:** it is a reflexive study developed from the results of a study on the knowledge of nursing about the precariousness of work, establishing a reflection from the perspective of Foucault's thinking regarding the concepts of power and discipline. The lack of regulation at the macro state power level enables institutions, in isolation, to set standards by which they create rules and disciplines that control labor relations and the labor market. For such action, they use power as a tool for alienation and domination over workers. **Final considerations:** it is necessary to promote and deepen discussions about the construction and experience of power relations that are crucial for maintaining the precariousness of nursing work, in order to improve its work conditions.

**Descriptors:** Nursing; philosophy in nursing; work conditions; capitalism.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** refletir sobre a precarização do trabalho de enfermagem, tomando como referencial a perspectiva filosófica de Michael Foucault e suas concepções acerca das relações de poder. **Conteúdo:** trata-se de estudo reflexivo desenvolvido a partir dos resultados de estudo sobre o conhecimento da enfermagem acerca da precarização do trabalho, estabelecendo-se uma reflexão sob a ótica do pensamento de Foucault no que tange aos conceitos de poder e disciplina. Verifica-se que a falta de regulamentação no nível do macro poder estatal permite que as instituições, isoladamente, determinem padrões a partir dos quais criam regras e disciplinas que controlam as relações de trabalho e o mercado de trabalho. Para tal ação, utilizam o poder como ferramenta de alienação e dominação dos trabalhadores. **Considerações finais:** é necessário realizar e aprofundar discussões sobre construção e vivência das relações de poder que são determinantes na manutenção da precarização do trabalho de enfermagem de modo a melhorar suas condições de trabalho.

**Descritores:** Enfermagem; filosofia em enfermagem; condições de trabalho; capitalismo.

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** reflexionar sobre la precarización del trabajo de enfermería, tomando como referencia la perspectiva filosófica de Michael Foucault y sus concepciones acerca de las relaciones de poder. **Contenido:** estudio reflexivo desarrollado a partir de los resultados de un estudio sobre el conocimiento de la enfermería sobre la precariedad del trabajo, estableciendo una reflexión desde la perspectiva de Foucault sobre los conceptos de poder y disciplina. La falta de regulación en el nivel de poder del estado macro permite a las instituciones, de forma aislada, establecer estándares mediante los cuales crean reglas y disciplinas que controlan las relaciones laborales y el mercado laboral. Para tal acción, usan el poder como una herramienta de alienación y dominio sobre los trabajadores. **Consideraciones finales:** es necesario conducir y profundizar discusiones sobre la construcción y experiencia de las relaciones de poder que son cruciales para mantener la precariedad del trabajo de enfermería a fin de mejorar sus condiciones de trabajo.

**Descriptorios:** Enfermería; filosofía en enfermería; condiciones de trabajo; capitalismo.

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## INTRODUCTION

Michael Foucault, a contemporary philosopher who analyzed issues related to knowledge, power, and men, shows current relevance with his studies, which have contributed to the human sciences by discussing the dynamics of power and how these relations are established in society.

From the perspective of power relations in society, currently in the political struggles, Foucault analyzes that power is not only established as a coercive force, from a macrostructure that projects itself to a microstructure. In this context, it is established in the micro human relations occurring in society, in a subjective process present in everyday practices, where there is more than one subject and which is referred to by the author as the microphysics of power. In this perspective all relations are relations of power, even if they are not perceived<sup>1</sup>.

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It is noteworthy that power also plays its role in the political and economic context, being present in work relations and in the productive system that determines them. Currently, in Brazil, we are experiencing the implementation of the neoliberal agenda, whose main action is the precarization of work, characterized by low investment, deregulation and flexibilization of working conditions<sup>2</sup>.

The proposed challenge is to reflect on the repercussions of nursing work precarization from the perspective of power relations, using Michel Foucault's philosophical conception as a central axis.

To this end, the results obtained from a literature review on the production of nursing knowledge concerning work precarization were established as a starting point. From such review, the main repercussions of the process of nursing work precarization<sup>3</sup> were identified. Then, a critical reflection encompassing the concept of micro power was conducted from the perspective of Foucault's thought.

## CONTENT

Initially, it is necessary to contextualize the term precarization herein addressed from the perspective of the political and economic strategies adopted from the neoliberal ideology, which aims to promote the restructuring of production modes<sup>4</sup>. Such tricky model aims at capital accumulation or the extraction of the surplus value, using mechanisms to cheapen the workforce and reduce investment in the production process.

Production is made cheaper through unregulated labor contracts, informal jobs and differentiated employment arrangements, such as outsourcing and temporary contracts, all with reduced workers' rights and social guarantees and low wages. In turn, low investment in working conditions is based on the reduction of production costs, with the consequent impairment of working conditions<sup>5</sup>.

In Brazil, productive restructuring became evident in the 1990s as part of the neoliberal agenda established by developed countries and imposed on others, aiming at the maintenance of the capitalist system. The political, social and economic reform under the auspices of promoting development adopted the demands from the international capital, such as the opening of trade, deregulation of production processes and labor relations, thus contributing to the flexibility of labor relations and organizations with precarization as the main strategy<sup>6</sup>.

In the public sector, flexibilization is consolidated by the regulation of public-private partnerships that have spread throughout all production sectors, also reaching the health sector. It is noteworthy that the lack of public policies to regulate the labor supply in the Unified Health System (SUS) has contributed to the modification of labor relations, through the inclusion of workers through other types of hiring processes than that of passing civil service examinations<sup>7</sup>.

Nursing workers have also been affected by the adoption of more flexible work relations in health care. Nurses' employability increased after the SUS expansion. However, it was accompanied by greater labor precarization, characterized by the admittance of workers without labor guarantees or social security. This condition imposes on these professionals working conditions that lead them to the multiplicity of jobs, low wages, loss of labor rights and subjection to unworthy working conditions, consequently impacting the work process and the quality of the services provided<sup>8</sup>.

Insecurity, uncertainty, subjection, competition, the proliferation of distrust and individualism and the seizure of time and subjectivity, in addition to affecting other dimensions of workers' lives by producing destabilization and social vulnerability with the loss of one's self-image, corrosion of value systems, presentism and precarization of working conditions, also favor worker domination<sup>9</sup>. The need for subsistence and the fear of unemployment strengthen the submission of such workers, their exploitation and acceptance of unworthy working conditions, without opportunities for them to perform professional activities with safety and quality<sup>10</sup>.

Given this reality, we understand precarization as the restructuring of labor relations that is based on the neoliberal ideals. Such ideals are translated into changes that negatively affect workers and are characterized by work deregulation through the loss of security and social achievements, as well as the degradation of working conditions as a result of low investment aimed at reducing production costs.

## FOUCAULT AND HIS CONCEPTIONS ABOUT POWER RELATIONS

It can be considered that the word power, in its various meanings - etymological, political and economic, is always associated with the idea of authority, persuasion, control, regulation and force. Regarding Foucault's thought about power, it is noteworthy that the author studied power not to create a theory about power, but to identify subjects acting on other subjects<sup>1</sup>.

Foucault, through his philosophy, sought to give visibility to the veiled, hidden form of power disguised in every micro space of society. More than understanding the power instituted in the macro space representing the State and its regulatory bodies, Foucault challenges us to observe the micro powers that permeate all social relations. It draws on Nietzsche's studies and begins the genealogy of power, from which he states that values are historically constructed, and what determines their construction are the power relations in a society<sup>11</sup>.

In their construction, Foucault analyzes the triad power, right and truth, where he shows power as a right by the ways in which society stands and moves. That is, if there is a king, there are also subjects; if there are laws in force, there are also those that determine them and those that owe obedience to them. Power, as a matter of fact, comes to be instituted, sometimes by the discourses of those who are obliged to produce it, sometimes by the movements of which they become victimized by the very organization that affects them and, sometimes, without due conscience or reflection<sup>1</sup>.

From this perspective, power can be understood as an action over actions. The power relations set by institutions, characterized by the oppressor-oppressed, mandate-mandated and persuasive-persuaded relation types and by as many as those that express command and those commanded, are marked by discipline. These disciplinary practices, which are widespread in institutions and even in capitalist enterprises, are strategies that become discursive practices that discipline the body, instituting gestures, attitudes, conduct and postures and regulate the mind and order<sup>12</sup>.

The objective of power is both economic and political. It uses discipline to lessen individuals' resistance and make men politically docile. Thus, it produces submissive bodies that are conditioned to working according to the imposed model, which are also referred to as *docile bodies*. They characteristically support the increase of force in economic terms of utility, but are destitute of the same force when analyzed in political terms of obedience<sup>12</sup>.

Foucault describes power as a central element in determining values in a society. According to his understanding, there are no universal values, but they are historically constructed from the power relations in a society. From this point of view, he presents power in a new dimension, with a creative function, in the sense that power relations create the reality in which men will live, create values and spread them through society, and they are eventually absorbed by men, who, then, start living according to them<sup>13</sup>.

Also, in his analyses, Foucault defines an inversion of the domination process, explaining that, in modern societies, power relations are increasingly disguised and subtle, and therefore, increasingly efficient for domination. Power no longer exerts control through force, but the dominated subjects absorb the values determined by power and begin to live up to such premises. Individuals associated with a decision center are those who set the standards of behavior, truths and values and base their lives on those standards determined by disciplinary practice<sup>14</sup>.

It is through disciplinary practice that power exercises its face of domination. However, it should be noted that power is not in a structure, such as the State, but it is spread throughout the micro spaces in society. And in the field of individuality, this is where the clashes of power relations take place. Thus, every conscious individual action can contribute to reproduce the domination conditions or question and undermine them in their bases with a view to modifying social reality<sup>15</sup>.

In postmodern society, marked by the disciplinary regime or the so-called control society, where the world of work, as described above, has been restructured from neoliberal thinking, everything that sediments and gains meaning becomes subversive, thus shaking the tendencies of power<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, whenever we act in an authentic, original and critical manner, we come into conflict; we oppose the striking tendency of neoliberalism, which is widespread alienation and the mechanical acceptance of living and working conditions in society.

## **PRECARIZATION OF NURSING WORK AND POWER RELATIONS**

The process of precarization of nursing work has been pointed out by several studies as a consequence of the global financial crisis<sup>17-28</sup>. The restructuring of the production process is based on the implementation of policies aimed at the retraction of the State in regulating the economy and public spending, with deregulation of the labor market through the extinction or modification of social and labor protection policies, thus contributing to the flexibilization of labor relations and worker exploitation.

The political reform adopted in Brazil has constructed an administrative model based on minimal regulation by the State, with the regulation of relations, and of labor relations in particular, by the market through free negotiation. Studies point out that the process of precarization of nursing work is characterized by the deregulation of workers' protection, thus ensuring the full exploitation of the workforce, which can be translated by the freedom of companies

to, according to their needs, dismiss workers without penalties, reduce working hours or resort to more hours, pay lower wages than those required by work parity and subdivide working hours by changing the schedules and characteristics of activities<sup>21-23,26-28</sup>.

In addition, with the administrative and political reform and the creation of public-private partnerships, hiring human resources in a deregulated manner, without guaranteeing labor rights and under undignified work conditions, has been made possible<sup>21-23,26-28</sup>.

By analyzing the precarization of nursing work in light of power relations, it appears that the political juridical deregulation of the State aimed at maintaining the minimal State promotes worker vulnerability because it is through the power regulatory center that the standards and values that are disseminated and followed by society are determined, as described by Foucault<sup>1</sup>. In its absence, the regulatory role is taken by institutions, which do not have the social protection of workers as an objective.

Thus, what occurs is that the class owning the means of production uses this condition to impose on nursing workers unworthy labor conditions with low salaries, greater intensification and illness, since they can hire workers, dismiss them and regulate the work market<sup>2</sup>. The maintenance of this reality is supported by the need for subsistence and high unemployment in the health-care sector, in addition to the use of mechanisms of social and labor unprotection for work domination and exploitation<sup>3</sup>.

Regarding the impacts of precarization on the nursing work process, it is identified that they are associated with inadequate working conditions, increased workload and low wages<sup>23-28</sup>. As for the abovementioned working conditions, the scarcity of materials, inadequate number of staff, hiring of workers without job security and inadequate physical facilities are noteworthy, thus characterizing an irrational and mistaken work organization that seeks cost reduction and increased productivity<sup>23,25,28</sup>.

The increased workload is another repercussion described by the studies<sup>22-26</sup>. Workers, under these conditions, have longer working hours than non-precarious workers.

Compensation is also an impactful aspect of this process. Nursing workers under the precarious regime are paid lower wages and, as a result, seek other activities to increase their income, thus also increasing their burnout levels. In addition, wage differences between workers who perform the same function have a direct influence on interpersonal relationships, generating conflicts and tensions among professionals<sup>21-23,26-28</sup>.

The concept of work intensification has also been proposed by studies that seek to detail and expand the understanding of both the determinants in workers' health and the consequences of distressful work under the new-old rules of capital<sup>30</sup>. This context can be expressed by the decline of what Marx termed as pores of the working day and of non-working time. There are also changes in the dimensions related to work itself as well as in how workers deal with such situations when they perceive themselves facing them<sup>31,32</sup>, which directly influences the organization and process of work, in addition to forms of collective organization to cope with such scenario.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This reflection study on the precarization of nursing work from Michael Foucault's philosophical perspective enabled us to understand some aspects related to the power relations present in the that process. Such relations are involved, in the macro political context, with State deregulation and the adoption of labor laws that promote workers' social unprotection.

The present context contributes to the maintenance of relations of nursing workers' domination and submission, since the maintenance of disciplinary practices of worker control is based on insecurity and fear of unemployment, imposing unworthy working conditions that are absorbed as accepted truths by professionals, thus leading to workers' alienation and immobilization.

Moreover, given the repercussions pointed out by the studies, it is found that the reformulation of the production process under the auspices of capital flexibilization uses, among various strategies, labor exploitation and the precariousness of working conditions in order to increase its profitability, thus fostering unworthy working conditions. Finally, it is pointed out that the process of precarization of nursing work negatively affects the conditions and organization of the work process, exposing workers to unworthy and socially unprotected labor conditions.

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