

# The meanings of work for nursing graduates faced with the COVID-19 scenario

**RESUMO** | Objetivo: Compreender os sentidos do trabalho para egressos de enfermagem frente ao cenário da COVID-19. Método: Pesquisa qualitativa com entrevistas gravadas através de um roteiro semiestruturado. O conteúdo foi analisado através de sucessivas leituras, com classificação e ordenação das respostas em forma de categorias estabelecidas a partir dos constructos: utilidade social; reconhecimento; autonomia; oportunidades de aprendizagem e desenvolvimento; cooperação e relacionamento com enfermeiros recém-formados; retidão moral do enfermeiro egresso. Resultado: O conteúdo das entrevistas foram analisados com base em seis constructos. Os enfermeiros egressos atribuíram sentidos positivos ao trabalho, pois definem o trabalho conforme as suas experiências ocupacionais, apesar da pressão imposta pela pandemia. Conclusão: Embora a excessiva carga de trabalho, déficit nos recursos humanos e materiais, falta de experiência no contexto hospitalar e condições de trabalho insalubres, os egressos sentem-se motivados e demonstram sentidos positivos em relação ao trabalho desenvolvido durante a pandemia.

**Descritores:** Enfermagem; Sentidos do Trabalho; Formação Profissional; COVID-19; Enfermeiros.

**ABSTRACT** | Understanding the meanings of work for nursing graduates in the face of the COVID-19 scenario. Methodology: Qualitative research with interviews recorded through a semi-structured script. The content was analyzed through successive readings, with classification and ordering of responses in the form of categories established from the constructs: social utility; recognition; autonomy; learning and development opportunities; cooperation and relationship with newly graduated nurses; moral rectitude of the egress nurse. Results: The content of the interviews was analyzed based on six constructs. The graduated nurses attributed positive meanings to work, as they define work according to their occupational experiences, despite the pressure imposed by the pandemic. Considerations: Despite the excessive workload, deficit in human and material resources, lack of experience in the hospital context and unhealthy working conditions, graduates feel motivated and show positive feelings in relation to the work developed during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Nursing; Work Senses; Professional Qualification; COVID-19; Nurses.

**RESUMEN** | Objetivo: Comprender los sentidos del trabajo para los graduados en enfermería frente al escenario de la COVID-19. Método: Investigación cualitativa con entrevistas grabadas a través de un guion semiestruturado. El contenido se analizó a través de lecturas sucesivas, con clasificación y ordenación de las respuestas en forma de categorías establecidas a partir de los constructos: utilidad social; reconocimiento; autonomía; oportunidades de aprendizaje y desarrollo; cooperación y relación con enfermeros recién graduados; rectitud moral del enfermero graduado. Resultado: El contenido de las entrevistas fue analizado a partir de seis constructos. Los enfermeros graduados atribuyeron sentidos positivos al trabajo, ya que definen el trabajo de acuerdo con sus experiencias ocupacionales, a pesar de la presión impuesta por la pandemia. Conclusión: A pesar de la excesiva carga de trabajo, déficit de recursos humanos y materiales, falta de experiencia en el contexto hospitalario y condiciones de trabajo insalubres, los graduados se sienten motivados y muestran sentidos positivos en relación al trabajo desarrollado durante la pandemia.

**Palabras claves:** Enfermería; Sentidos del Trabajo; Formación Profesional; COVID-19; Enfermeras.

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of nursing in relation to the care of patients infected with the 'Corona Virus Disease' (COVID-19) is complex and dynamic, and it is necessary to combine technical and humanistic skills to provide agile and safe care. In addition, the role of nursing in mediating between families and patients hospitalized with this infection is essential to reduce the feeling of loneliness and fear of isolated patients<sup>(1)</sup>.

Faced with the pandemic scenario, the research seeks to understand the meanings of work for nursing graduates, establishing a relationship with the constructs: social utility, autonomy, learning opportunities, development, co-

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operation, relationship with colleagues, recognition and moral rectitude<sup>(2)</sup>.

Facing the pandemic in health institutions requires a high number of professionals and health support services. A deficit of collaborators was noticed in health institutions, in view of the high rates of virulence and mortality imposed by the coronavirus<sup>(3)</sup>. From this, it can be deduced that the entry of young nursing graduates into the labor market was facilitated due to the great demand needed to meet the shortage in hospitals.

Youth is characterized as a part of human life in which it constitutes its own identity, being much more than a simple passing phase. Among the new conceptions of youth, the idea that age categories are becoming lifestyles stands out. Thus, youth is reduced to a part of human life, constituting its own cultural identity, going beyond a passing moment and presenting a permanent character. In this process of youth, the individual experiences different experiences for his social construction, such as work<sup>(4)</sup>.

The work is revealed as identity construction. In this way, it incorporates dimensions such as sociability and solidary ways of living and interacting with others. In addition, it can be said that work acquires a human dimension, since it is through it that we recover various feelings in our professional experiences. In short, work occupies a central position, presenting several meanings precisely because of its identity complexity, as well as the situation of the world of work in modern society<sup>(5)</sup>.

In this context, nursing professionals perform work of extreme social relevance, working from health promotion in primary care to the front line in medium and high complexity<sup>(6)</sup>. Therefore, work presents itself as one of the first segments of realization, being between the sphere of need and realization. A job that makes sense is carried out efficiently, intrinsically related to personal satisfaction, generating experiences of

human relationships and thus, leading to the professional's safety and autonomy<sup>(7)</sup>.

Faced with the pandemic scenario, work overload added to unhealthy conditions, inadequate remuneration and precarious labor relations, end up causing suffering and illness at work<sup>(8)</sup>. Coping with COVID-19 within health institutions requires a high number of health professionals and support services. Among them, nursing professionals represent about 2.2 million in Brazil, acting on the front line of care provided<sup>(9)</sup>.

In view of this, the present study is justified because it deals with a topic of social, economic and cultural relevance; permeating different audiences that make up society. The importance of understanding the meanings of work for nursing graduates in the context of COVID-19 is due to the broad social utility of this profession.

As graduates and future nurses, understanding the meaning of work for graduates is necessary to approach the reality experienced by these professionals, in order to provide substrate for future studies. Thus, the problem of this research is "what are the main difficulties encountered in this process of insertion in the labor market?" Therefore, the general objective is to understand the meanings of work for nursing graduates in the face of the COVID-19 scenario; unfolding in the specific objectives: to characterize the graduates in terms of age; area of work as a nurse; time and institution of work and identify the meanings of work for nursing graduates.

## METHOD

The study approach was qualitative and data collection occurred through interviews recorded through a semi-structured script. The analysis categories were composed from the constructs: social utility; recognition; autonomy; learning and development opportuni-

ties; cooperation and relationship with newly graduated nurses; moral rectitude of the graduated nurse. The research is an exploratory work. The technique used was field design through interviews, characterized as a field study. The method aims to collect information that leads to the resolution of the proposed question, using observation and questioning techniques.

The research participants were graduates of the undergraduate nursing course in the second half of 2020, who completed their graduation at the University of Vale do Itajaí (UNIVALI), Campus de Itajaí, Santa Catarina. The sample was intentional, consisting of 09 people. For this purpose, a formal invitation was made via e-mail, in order to present the Free and Informed Consent Form (TCLE). As acceptance of the invitation and the TCLE duly signed by the participant. After signing, a date and time for a semi-structured interview was scheduled. The interview took place remotely through video call and audio recording via digital platforms. UNIVALI graduates who graduated in the second half of 2020 and who were exercising their profession in the labor market were included as research subjects.

The collection instrument used was a semi-structured interview script. This script combined open and closed questions, allowing the interviewee to discuss what was asked, in a flexible way and prioritizing a better quality of the information collected<sup>(10)</sup>.

To carry out the project, the researchers contacted the rector of the University of Vale do Itajaí, requesting the term of science and acquiescence. After the qualification panel was carried out by professors of the Nursing Course and invited researchers, the project was forwarded to the Research Ethics Committee in accordance with Resolution 466/12 and 580/18 of the National Health Council/MS. With the ethical opinion, the researchers contacted the coordinator of the Nursing course re-

requesting access to the list of graduates who completed the course in the second half of 2020.

With the invitation accepted and the TCLE signed by the participant, the interview was scheduled for March 2022. The method used to perform the data analysis was the content analysis, which, in turn, allows the elaboration of logical and justified deductions. The method consists of analysis techniques that use systematic and objective procedures to describe the content of the messages<sup>(11)</sup>. Content analysis is a technique that aims to analyze and understand the idea that the subject wants to convey, looking for other realities through messages.

The research was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Vale do Itajaí, and data were collected only after project approval. CEP's consolidated opinion number is 5,291,408, approved on March 15, 2022.

In addition, considering that this research involves human beings, the ethical and legal principles provided for in CNS resolution n. 466/12 and its supplementary menus. The research was guided by professor Mayara Ana Cunha Kersten and carried out by academics Thobias Itamar Tomasi and Maria Inês Pantoja Daniel.

The participants formalized the authorization of their participation, becoming aware of the aspects related to the research, through the explanations of the researcher and signature after agreement of the Term of Free and Clarified Consent. It is also noteworthy that the freedom of research participants who refused to participate was respected, as well as the freedom to leave the research at any time, without any harm to them. Throughout the research process, the data were handled only by those involved in the research and kept confidential, in the possession of the researchers and kept for 5 years so that any participant could have access to the

term at any time.

**RESULT**

An invitation was made to 10 graduates, the participants were contacted via email, and nine of these graduates accepted the invitation, offering to participate in the research, who were interviewed according to the possibilities of each one. The data for the characterization of the study participants were presented in Table 1, highlighting points such as: age, area of activity and public or private sector.

Regarding the age range of the interviewed graduates, there is a variation from 22 to 28 years old, characterizing it as a young audience. In this sense, it is interesting to highlight that the age range from 15 to 29 years old is established by the National Youth Policy, instituted in 2005. It can even be said that young people's participation in the world of work begins even before university, when their professional identity is being formed through the various existing path options, often linked to the choice of a particular profession. The professional insertion process is a social milestone in the life of youth<sup>(12)</sup>.

As shown in table 1, seven out of nine respondents work in the public sector and only 2 in the private sec-

tor. Regarding the area of activity, it is noticed that 4 participants work in the hospital sector, ranging from services provided to Urgency and Emergency; Quality of Care and Intensive Care Unit (ICU). Another 3 graduates work in Basic Health Units, working with the Family Health Strategy (ESF) and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). Finally, 2 participants work with Epidemiological Surveillance, planning and implementing health actions.

The health crisis generated by the new coronavirus has been established worldwide. The name COVID-19 is attributed to the disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. Regarding the labor market, the scenario configured by COVID-19 is similar to other moments in human history in which there were pandemics, which in turn are known to bring great social, political and economic damage. Despite a significant increase in the unemployment rate in Brazil, on the other hand, at the end of 2020, 187,621 new records of nursing professionals were registered at COFEN<sup>(13)</sup>.

In the year 2020, there was an increase of approximately 28% in relation to the new registrations of nursing professionals when compared to 2019. This represents a little more than double that

**Table 1 – Characteristics of nursing graduates, 2022.**

NURSE	AGE	OCCUPATION AREA	OCCUPATION AREA
NURSE01	25	Urgency and emergency	Public
NURSE02	22	Hospital Assistance	Public
NURSE03	25	Family Health Strategy (Management in Health)	Public
NURSE04	23	Hospital Quality	Private
NURSE05	23	sexually transmitted infections Transmissible (UBS)	Public
NURSE06	28	Family Health Strategy (Management in Health)	Public
NURSE07	23	Hospital Assistance (ICU)	Private
NURSE08	28	Epidemiological surveillance	Public
NURSE09	27	Epidemiological surveillance	Public

Source: Data extracted from the authors' survey instrument, 2022.



observed in the previous year and practically three times more than that observed in 2017<sup>(13)</sup>.

In this way, nursing professionals constitute the largest professional group when it comes to the health area, being at the forefront in the fight against pandemics. Because these professionals care for patients more closely, the physical contact required for procedures exposes these professionals to a high risk of contamination<sup>(14)</sup>.

In this sense, the increase in the number of new records at COFEN is related to the social utility of nursing, which is the profession responsible for exercising the art of caring. Because it is a pandemic with a high transmissibility rate and which infected a large part of the population, the demand for hospitals and health care services increased significantly, with a demand for more professionals to be hired, in order to meet the needs related to resources. human beings in health services<sup>(13)</sup>.

Taking this into account, it can be deduced that, with a greater demand for professionals in health services, entry into the job market was facilitated for nursing graduates, both at a technical and higher level.

## DISCUSSION

According to the speeches of each graduate, it is clear that the constructs (social utility, learning and development opportunities, autonomy, cooperation and relationship with colleagues, recognition and moral rectitude) are interrelated, and from them emerge various meanings of work, such as: work as a meaning of life; work as social action; work as help and love; the work made difficult by the team, among other meanings.

In the day-to-day of nursing, despite the rigid routines and protocols, it is possible to notice that, from the moment the worker feels pleasure and motivation when carrying out his activities,

he builds his professional identity. This characterizes an individual dimension and helps them find meaning in their work<sup>(2)</sup>.

It can be said that nursing professionals are responsible for carrying out work of extreme social relevance, working from prevention and health promotion to direct assistance to hospitalized patients, composing the front line in low, medium and high complexity<sup>(15)</sup>. One can see the formation of numerous meanings of work that emerge, as the figure below represents:

Still dealing with the 6 constructs and bringing these concepts closer to the universe of nursing<sup>(6)</sup>.

Social utility corresponds to the social contribution of work. By itself, nursing is a profession with broad social utility, as its objective is to assist in the recovery of the health of people and the community, providing the necessary care. In this sense, being useful and supportive to the other gives satisfaction to the professional.

Autonomy refers to the ability to make decisions about certain variables.

Figure 1: Meanings of work for graduated nurses, 2022.



Source: Data extracted from nurses' interviews, 2022.

This construct refers not only to the performance and development of work according to technical skills and abilities, but also confers a sense of financial independence, providing a feeling of social and economic security.

Learning and development opportunities deal with the acquisition of knowledge and skills, through interpersonal and intersectoral relationships and professional-patient experience. In addition, it also corresponds to professional growth and learning.

Cooperation and relationship with colleagues refers to moments of solidarity and relationship with colleagues, favoring multidisciplinary work with other professions in the health area. In this context, it is worth noting that relationships and their hierarchical levels can directly influence the subject's experience in building the meaning of work.

Recognition confers an experience of appreciation and satisfaction regarding their work, from patients, family members and even co-workers and leaders. The recognition of their work by the other makes the nursing professional attribute meanings to work, through their identity conferred by the individuals who interact with them.

Moral righteousness is understood as work that is in accordance with the individual's ethical and moral dimension, working in an environment that respects human dignity. In addition, it considers the ethical dimensions of interpersonal relationships, in the subjects' health and disease conditions.

When questioned about the meaning of work, it is noticed that the interviewed graduates understand the social importance of their work, even considering the different fields of activity of the participants. And for being aware of their social importance, they feel grateful for the role they play, bringing meaning to their work, as mentioned in the speeches of NURSE06, ENF 07 and

NURSE08:

"I think my role is extremely important because I am taking care of a precious asset in people's lives - Health". NUR06

"For me, work means different actions, activities, efforts, which are developed both individually and collectively". NUR08

"I know how rewarding my work is because of the number of people I can help, regardless of whether it is SUS or private, the health area has a huge job in the lives of patients, especially nursing that is side by side at all times. Society would not live without us and I can see that in every shift". NURSE07

In the search for the authenticity of a life full of meanings, work is configured as one of the first segments of fulfillment, being characterized as a mediating element between the sphere of need and fulfillment. Through work, a process is obtained that simultaneously alters nature and self-transforms the Being that develops the action(17). In the speeches of nurses NURSE09 and NURSE07, it is possible to identify that the interviewees add meanings not only to work, but also relate them to the meaning of their lives:

"It is an essential condition and goes beyond earning a living, it also has to do with personal fulfillment, how we feel useful – as I said earlier – and finding a meaning for the days, and it is through our work that we manage to put into practice all our goals and achievements both work and personal". NUR09

In addition to work expanding the individual's material and

economic reach, it is closely linked to the social, psychic and biological dimension. Thus, it can be characterized as an instrument that introduces the individual into the social context, in addition to allowing the practice and improvement of their skills, providing a feeling of appreciation, personal fulfillment and even adding value and meaning to the lives of professionals. These feelings and desires are perceived in the speeches of NURSE01, NURSE02 and NURSE08:

"Work for me means being able to practice the profession for which I studied and aimed for years and which I still consider myself in the process of improvement to improve the quality of care in which I provide". NURSE2

"I see the difficulty even in terms of experience and technique, no matter how much we learn and have laboratories, the issue is everyday life and practice, the more we do, the more successful we are in our functions". NURSE1

Finally, it is emphasized that work is one of the first segments of realization. For the work to be carried out with meaning, it is assumed that it should be a generator of experiences of human relationships and, therefore, tends to promote safety and the autonomy of the professional, meeting the construct of autonomy<sup>(16)</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The large number of people infected with COVID-19 simultaneously seeking assistance from health services was able to jeopardize the functioning of these

services and, in turn, almost collapse their operational capacity. As a result, there was an increase in the demand for health professionals to serve the population, such as, for example, newly graduated nurses who had their first professional experience in the face of this pandemic scenario.

From this study, it was possible to perceive that the graduated nurses attributed positive meanings to work, despite the pressure imposed by the pandemic, giving multiple meanings to work, since there are several factors that interfere in their view of work and how it relates to your personal and social life.

The content of the interviews was analyzed based on six constructs, among them: social usefulness, learn-

ing and development opportunities, autonomy, cooperation and relationship with colleagues, recognition and, finally, moral rectitude. The interviewees were able to perceive the social utility of their work and bring meaning to their work activity, adding value and meaning to their lives.

Despite the high workload, the deficit in human and material resources, lack of experience in the hospital context and unhealthy working conditions, the graduates still feel motivated and demonstrate positive feelings towards work. On the other hand, the lack of experience in professional practice can hinder the experience during work activities, especially with regard to the autonomy construct.

In this way, autonomy is closely related to the profession's own knowledge, in order to carry out activities with power and quality, based on scientific knowledge. In turn, the lack of professional autonomy is linked to the lack of technical-scientific knowledge.

Therefore, it is important to highlight that despite the little experience, these professionals bring with them the strength and the will to put into practice everything that was learned during college. Promoting health from the sum of its efforts and aiming at the quality of care provided to patients and even to society as a whole.

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