

Research methods used in the production of knowledge on nursing administration**Métodos de pesquisa empregados na produção do conhecimento sobre administração em enfermagem**Abel Silva de Meneses¹, Maria Cristina Sanna²

¹ Nurse, Master in Nursing. Nurse of the Family Health Strategy of the Associação Comunitária Monte Azul. São Paulo, SP, Brazil. E-mail: enfermeiro.meneses@gmail.com.

² Nurse, PhD in Nursing. São Paulo, SP, Brazil. E-mail: mcsanna@uol.com.br.

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze and describe the characteristics of research methods used in the production of dissertations and theses on Nursing Administration. This is a documentary study of quantitative approach, covering 596 abstracts of research works on Nursing Administration, analyzed according to the variables of research method, temporal distribution, titles and themes. Of all analyzed abstracts, 49.8% were quantitative studies and 43.1% were qualitative. Descriptive studies amounted to 74.8%, exploratory to 21.5% and cross-sectional accounted for 86.7%. As for the data collection procedure, 46.8% were case studies and 25.7% were surveys. The positivist thought guided 49.0% of studies and phenomenology appeared in 19.3%. Only 38.3% of the studies deepened the analysis with the philosophical and theoretical framework. We concluded that the Nursing Administration knowledge was predominantly formed by quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional and case studies, enlightened by the positivist thought and of little depth in the philosophical and theoretical framework of analysis.

Descriptors: Nursing Administration Research; Academic Dissertations; Education, Nursing, Graduate; Methodology.

RESUMO

Este estudo teve por objetivo analisar e descrever as características de métodos de pesquisa empregados na produção de dissertações e teses sobre Administração em Enfermagem. Trata-se de pesquisa documental de abordagem quantitativa, contemplando 596 resumos de produtos de pesquisa sobre Administração em Enfermagem, analisados segundo as variáveis método de pesquisa, distribuição temporal, titulação e temáticas. Do total de resumos analisados, 49,8% eram pesquisas quantitativas e 43,1% qualitativas. As pesquisas descritivas somaram 74,8%, as exploratórias 21,5% e as transversais 86,7%. Quanto ao procedimento de coleta de dados, 46,8% eram estudos de caso e 25,7% levantamentos. O pensamento positivista iluminou 49,0% das pesquisas e a fenomenologia 19,3%. Apenas 38,3% das pesquisas aprofundaram a análise com referencial teórico-filosófico. Conclui-se que o conhecimento sobre Administração em Enfermagem foi constituído predominantemente de estudos quantitativos, descritivos, transversais e de estudos de caso, iluminados pelo pensamento positivista e pouco aprofundado por referencial teórico-filosófico de análise.

Descritores: Pesquisa em Administração de Enfermagem; Dissertações Acadêmicas; Educação de Pós-Graduação em Enfermagem; Metodologia.

INTRODUCTION

In Brazil, nursing research has followed a significant path since the creation of the first nursing postgraduate programs in the 1970s. There was progress both in quantity and quality, achieving sovereignty as an area of knowledge resulting from nursing knowledge built over three generations of nursing scientists⁽¹⁻²⁾. Their repertoire has guided a study on the epistemology of nursing knowledge⁽³⁾, a legacy that must be cultivated by the nursing scientific community.

An important part of this scientific legacy consists of research products on Nursing Administration (NA), given the distinction of this knowledge among the 'lines of research and priorities in nursing' under the denomination of 'Health Services and Nursing Management'⁽⁴⁾.

According to governmental data⁽⁵⁻⁶⁾, Brazilian Nursing currently has 66 postgraduate programs and 533 research groups at work developing human resources capable of cultivating knowledge in nursing. However, only 3.0% (two) of the postgraduate programs (Escola de Enfermagem da Universidade Federal da Bahia and Escola de Enfermagem da Universidade de São Paulo) and 8.9% (45) of the research groups are focused on advanced research on NA in Brazil.

Although researchers in the international scene⁽⁷⁻⁸⁾ have shown a configuration of knowledge on NA, nothing was found about the epistemology of knowledge in this field.

Therefore, identifying considerations on international collaboration among postgraduate programs in NA would not be unusual⁽⁹⁾, confirming the 'scarcity of resources and knowledge in Nursing Administration'.

In fact, by using systems for recovery of the nursing scientific production indexed on internationally certified databases, we found a lack of updated knowledge on the subject, indicating the need to awaken reflections aimed at expanding and diversifying the repertoire of knowledge on NA⁽¹⁰⁾.

To expand and diversify the repertoire of knowledge on NA, it is important to reflect on the methodological foundations that underpinned the construction of this knowledge, because the decision on the study method depends on the area of interest and the state of knowledge about the object of study⁽¹¹⁻¹²⁾, and the study question itself.

Although there are publications on scientific methodology in general, the presentation of the methodological profile that paved the construction of knowledge on NA⁽¹³⁻¹⁴⁾ can contribute to highlight gaps or direct the priorities in choosing more solid study designs in this field. Based on the foundations of nursing research, such arrangement aroused the interest of researching⁽¹²⁾: what was the methodological framework that formed the foundations of the construction of knowledge on NA in Brazilian postgraduate programs between 1963 and 2011?

Thus, the study aimed to analyze and describe the characteristics of the research methods used in the production of dissertations and theses on NA in Brazilian postgraduate programs in the period between 1963 and 2011.

METHOD

This is a documentary research of quantitative approach that examined 7,722 abstracts distributed in 30 volumes of the Catalog of Theses and Dissertations of the Center for Studies and Research in Nursing (CEPEEn) of the Brazilian Nursing Association (ABEn) available electronically on CD-ROM (vol. I -XVIII) and on the website of ABEn (vol. XIX-XXX).

The search period of documentary sources was between the years 1963 and 2011, by identifying the earliest and latest research products on NA available in the CEPEEn database. We found the doctoral thesis on the Nursing Workforce in the Brazilian society by Alcantara Glete dating from 1963, and in 2011 there were 44 other research products on NA in this database.

Data collection occurred through systematic reading of all abstracts and selection of the 596 on NA, which is the study population. The inclusion criterion was limited to the research products that had NA as the object of study in specialization postgraduate programs (equivalent to specialization).

In the process of critical reading, the abstracts were classified in a Microsoft Excel[®] database according to the variables of academic title, year of defense, theme, type of research and theoretical analysis framework, detailed in the Figure 1 matrix.

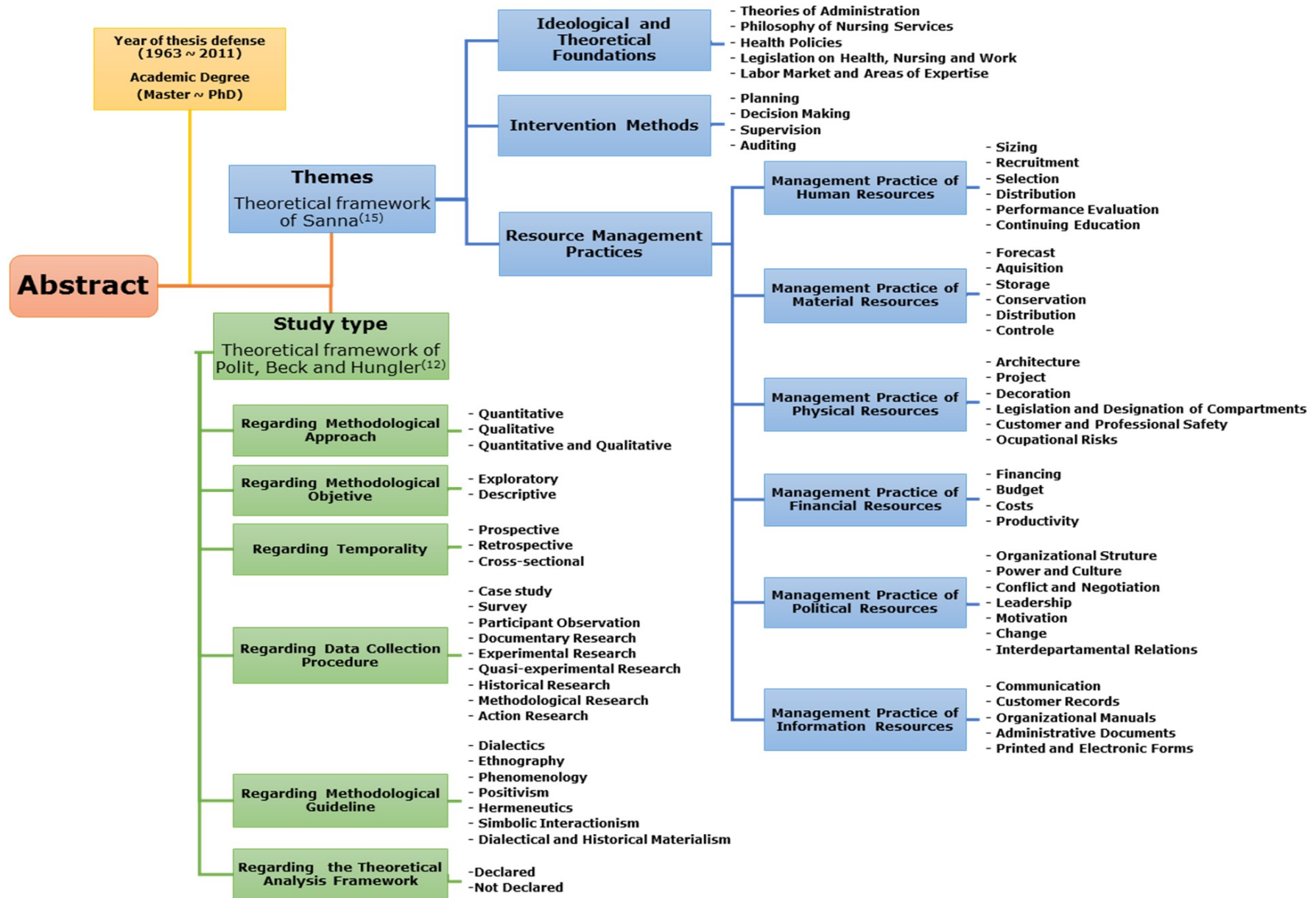
The theoretical framework of analysis used in the categorization of research types was based on the propositions of students of the research methodology in nursing⁽¹²⁾. The theoretical framework of analysis with relevance for the thematic categorization of abstracts in NA was the Structure of Knowledge on Nursing Administration (SKNA) proposed by a researcher of knowledge epistemology on NA⁽¹⁵⁾.

The database content was subjected to peer triangulation, in which the evaluators - doctors, master and doctoral advisors, research group leaders and scientific journal editors - appreciated the classification of abstracts according to the research method used. To this end, the evaluators were given a guide that summarized the definitions of the research types in Figure 1. Then, they read the abstracts attached to the worksheet and by consulting the guide, evaluated the judgment of the authors.

The pivot table mechanism and mathematical and statistical functions of the Microsoft Excel[®] were used for data analysis, allowing an analytical look as a function of any variable through stratification and automation of information, and measurement of absolute and relative frequencies of the study variables.

The study was conducted in accordance with the required ethical standards, and was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal de São Paulo and approved under CEP number: 0171/12HE.

Figure 1: Classification matrix of the production on Nursing Administration. São Paulo, SP, Brazil, 1963-2011.

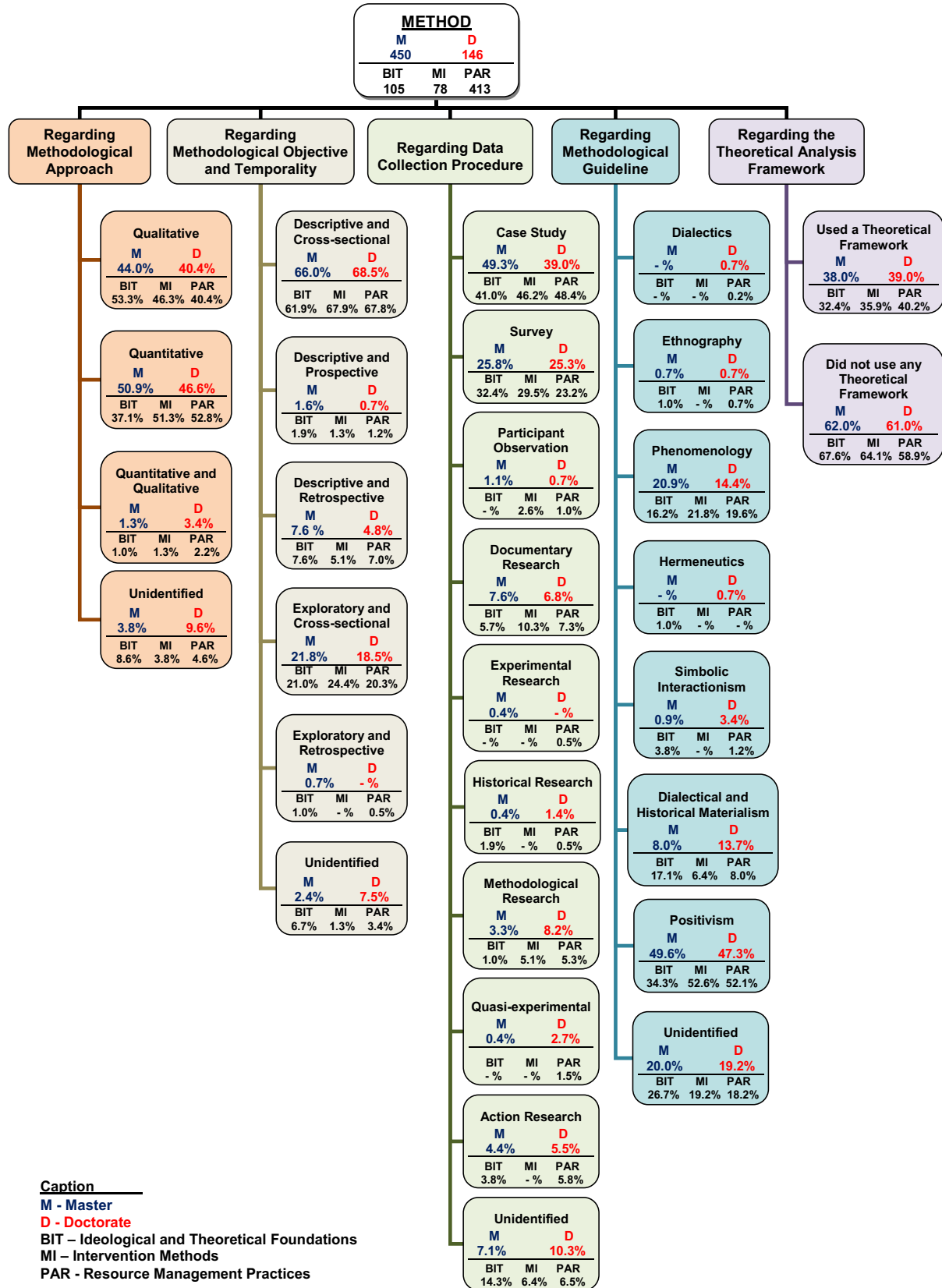


RESULTS

The Brazilian scientific production on NA represents 7.7% (596) of all production of specialization postgraduate nursing programs, of which 450 (75.5%) researches were the object of study at master's programs and 146 (24.5 %) at doctoral programs. A quite similar proportion was found in a study that also characterized the Brazilian production of postgraduate programs on NA⁽¹³⁾.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of this knowledge repertoire according to the characteristics of the method used to build it. Note the proportionate contrast of the methodological characteristics of master's products and doctoral products according to the components of the three major groups of the Structure of Knowledge on Nursing Administration⁽¹⁵⁾ – Ideological and Theoretical Foundations of NA, Intervention Methods and Resource Management Practices.

Figure 2: Distribution of the production of Postgraduate Programs on Nursing Administration according to the methodological characteristics of the study and the Structure of Knowledge on Nursing Administration. São Paulo, SP, Brazil, 1963-2011.



Caption
M - Master
D - Doctorate
BIT – Ideological and Theoretical Foundations
MI – Intervention Methods
PAR - Resource Management Practices

DISCUSSION

Regarding the methodological approach, 49.8% of all research on NA resulted from quantitative studies, 43.1%

of qualitative studies, and 1.8% of quantitative and qualitative studies. In 5.2% of the abstracts, we could not identify the type of methodological approach. Prospects

of this nature have been shown by the nursing scientific community^(13,16) when emphasizing the study designs on NA.

Although the scientific literature on NA has presented a substantial amount of qualitative research, there was more expressiveness in the field of quantitative research, which is understandable, because this type of research 'adopts systematic, objective and rigorous strategy to generate and refine knowledge', and this seems to have relevant applicability in research on NA⁽¹¹⁾.

Quantitative studies first appeared in theses defended in 1975 and remained regular since then. Qualitative studies, in turn, first appeared in theses defended in 1963, but regularly only from the 1990s. The quantitative and qualitative studies appeared for the first time in theses defended in 1982, but only had regularity from 2006.

Quantitative studies and qualitative studies are more present in master's theses, while quantitative and qualitative studies had predominance in doctoral works. The abstracts of doctoral studies did not identify the methodological approach 3.8% more in relation to master's studies, which is consistent with the analysis of other researchers⁽¹⁷⁾ who studied the doctoral production.

Analyzing the representativeness of the methodological approach according to the structure of knowledge on nursing administration⁽¹⁵⁾, it was found that most products on Ideological and Theoretical Foundations of NA employed the qualitative approach (53.3%), while the majority of products on Resource Management Practices employed the quantitative approach (52.8%) and the quantitative and qualitative approach (2.2%). Most products on Intervention Methods also resulted of quantitative approach studies (51.3%).

Regarding the methodological objective of all the production on NA, 74.8% was the result of descriptive research and 21.5% of exploratory research. In relation to temporality, 86.7% was the result of cross-sectional

studies, 7.4% of retrospective studies and 1.3% of prospective studies.

Although the objective of descriptive research is to describe facts, determine phenomena frequency and provide the knowledge base for proposing hypotheses that can guide more in-depth research designs⁽¹¹⁾, methodologically, the great amount of descriptive research apparently has not had this effect yet. This shows weakness in study designs^(13,17), considering the small quantity of experimental and quasi-experimental studies in the scientific literature on NA. Explanatory research designs have not been identified.

With regard to temporality, perhaps cross-sectional studies are preferred due to their lower costs, the easy logistics execution of the survey, and the promptness to draw conclusions about the study problem^(12,18).

Descriptive and cross-sectional studies first appeared in theses defended in 1967 and remained regular. Exploratory and cross-sectional studies first appeared in theses defended in 1975, but had regularity only from 1990. Descriptive and retrospective studies first appeared in 1963, but had regularity only from 2005. Exploratory and retrospective studies appeared only in theses defended in 1978 and 2006, and descriptive and prospective studies appeared from 1999, but without regularity.

There was a higher concentration of descriptive and cross-sectional studies in doctoral works than in master's. There were no doctoral studies of exploratory and retrospective methodology and these works also had the highest percentage of studies in which the methodological objective and time objective could not be identified (7.5%). Therefore, it is a relevant criticism that the doctoral scope of production still lacks research designs capable of generating scientific evidence of greater intellectual impact⁽¹⁷⁾.

Following the same pattern as the methodological approach, the analysis of methodological objective and time objective in relation to the structure of knowledge on NA⁽¹⁵⁾ showed that 61.9% of the production on

Ideological and Theoretical Foundations of NA originated from studies of descriptive and cross-sectional methodology. This group also stood out in the use of descriptive and prospective methodologies, descriptive and retrospective, and exploratory and retrospective.

The production on Intervention Methods stood out in the use of descriptive and cross-sectional methodology (67.9%), and exploratory and cross-sectional (24.4%). Regarding the production on Resource Management Practices, 67.8% of its content was also product of studies of descriptive and cross-sectional methodology.

Regarding the data collection procedure of the entire production on NA, 46.8% came from case studies, 25.7% from surveys, 7.4% from documentary research, 4.7% from action research, 4.5% from methodological research, 1% from participant observation and quasi-experimental research, 0.7% from historical research and 0.3% from experimental research. In 7.9% of abstracts, it was not possible to identify the data collection procedure.

Most research works were the result of case studies, demonstrating that researchers of NA are interested in flexible study designs, and have examined the detailed investigation of specific situations involving their objects of study that result in new discoveries^(12,19).

Another feature of researchers on NA is their interest on surveys, probably because this method can be applied to investigate a variety of subjects and in which information can be used for many purposes⁽¹²⁾.

Although less frequently, researchers dedicated to the study of NA also have significant interest in documentary research, action research and methodological research, demonstrating that investigations of objects related to documentary sources, practical results and development of new instruments are still in the first steps of a long methodological journey in the universe of scientific production of this knowledge field^(20,21).

Case studies first appeared on theses defended in 1979, while surveys first appeared in 1975, and both have been regular from the 1980s. Historical research first

appeared in theses defended in 1975, with regularity from 2010. Methodological research began to appear in 1977, and action research in 1989, but neither of those had regularity during the studied period. Other kinds of research did not show significant quantity nor regularity during the study period.

Historical research, as well as methodological, quasi-experimental and action research had relevance in doctoral works. Case studies, survey, participant observation, documentary research and experimental research were more relevant in master's works. The data collection procedure of 'survey' type was employed by both almost in the same proportion.

Considering the data collection procedure in relation to the structure of knowledge on NA⁽¹⁵⁾, we observed that the works on Ideological and Theoretical Foundations of NA were the ones who used the survey research type (32.4%), concentrated in the theme 'Labor market and Areas of Expertise'. The works on Intervention Methods used mostly the documentary research (10.3%), concentrated in the theme 'Auditing'. The works on Resource Management Practices used mostly the case study (48.4%), concentrated in works on 'Management Practice of Political Resources', in the themes of 'Motivation' and 'Power and Culture'. Management Practice of Resources was also the group that most employed the action research (5.8%), concentrated in works on 'Management Practice of Human Resources', in the theme of 'Continuing Education'.

Aside from the above, the content of Resource Management Practices was also a particular product of experimental and quasi-experimental research, concentrated in studies on Management Practice of Human Resources, in the theme of 'Continuing Education'.

The methodological guidelines adopted in the analysis and understanding of research works act as lenses that help to drive the analysis focus on the object of study⁽¹²⁾. In the universe of scientific literature on NA, 49.0% were analyzed in the light of positivist thought,

19.3% in the light of phenomenology, 9.4% in the light of dialectical and historical materialism, 1.5% in the light of symbolic interactionism, 0.7 in the light of ethnography and 0.2% in the light of dialectics and hermeneutics. In 19.8% of the abstracts, it was not possible to identify the methodological guideline used.

In 1963, appeared the studies in the light of positivism, remaining regular since then. This school of thought has been a tradition in the thought of nursing since Florence Nightingale⁽²²⁾. In 1987, first appeared the studies using the phenomenology thought, marking the beginning of the use of phenomenology in nursing research in Brazil⁽²³⁾. However, this methodological guideline only started to be used regularly from the 1990s.

The dialectical and historical materialism was the third most frequent analysis option in studies on NA, and appeared in theses defended in 1994 without much regularity in the other years studied. They are products resulting from the understanding of social changes in a given historical moment that trigger changes in the NA scene⁽²⁴⁾.

In master's works, the thoughts of phenomenology and positivism were more used. In doctoral works, studies in the light of dialectical and historical materialism, symbolic interactionism, dialectics and hermeneutics were more frequent than in master's works. Ethnography has been employed in master and doctoral works in the same proportion. This methodological guideline has been adopted recently given its broader interpretation, and used not only in studies of cultures in general, but also to explore the culture of small groups⁽²⁵⁾ such as Nursing Services. We could not identify the methodological guideline in 20.0% of master's abstracts and in 19.2% of doctoral abstracts.

Regarding the methodological guideline analyzed according to the structure of knowledge on NA⁽¹⁵⁾, we observed that the works on Ideological and Theoretical Foundations of NA were those most frequently analyzing studies in the light of dialectical and historical materialism

(17.1%), and were concentrated in the themes of 'Philosophy in Nursing Services' and 'Labor market and Areas of Expertise'. The theme of 'Philosophy in Nursing Services' was also studied in the light of symbolic interactionism (3.8%). This was the only group using hermeneutics in the analysis of the works.

The works on Intervention Methods were those that mostly guided the studies in the light of positivism (52.6%), concentrated in the theme of 'Auditing'. In second place came the thought of phenomenology (21.8%), concentrated in the theme of 'Decision Making'.

The only group using dialectics in the analysis of its products was the Resource Management Practices, concentrated in the themes of 'Management Practice of Human Resources' and 'Continuing Education'.

Finally, in relation to the theoretical analysis framework, 38.3% (228) of the authors of studies on NA employed some theoretical analysis framework, and 61.7% did not employ any theoretical framework. The authors of doctoral works have used philosophical and theoretical frameworks by 1.0% more than authors of master's works.

The philosophical and theoretical frameworks began to be used in theses defended in 1977 and had a significant increase in theses defended in the 2000s.

Regarding the philosophical and theoretical framework of analysis in relation to the structure of knowledge on NA⁽¹⁵⁾, we observed that 32.4% (34) of the production on Ideological and Theoretical Foundations of NA employed some type of philosophical and theoretical framework of analysis. The themes that most employed the philosophical and theoretical framework of analysis were 'Philosophy of Nursing Services' and 'Labor Market and Areas of Expertise'. The most popular framework in this group was the 'Work Process of Ricardo Bruno Mendes-Gonçalves' signaling the concern of nurses with the 'health work process'.

In the works on Intervention Methods, it was found that 35.9% (28) were analyzed in the light of some sort of philosophical and theoretical framework, and that

philosophical and theoretical frameworks were more used in the works on 'Auditing'. The most popular frameworks were the 'Quality Approach to Health of Avedis Donabedian' and 'Theory of Total Quality of W. Edwards Deming', revealing that the health quality control processes have been the nursing focus in their search for knowledge.

It was observed that 40.2% (166) of the works on Resource Management Practices was analyzed in the light of some type of philosophical and theoretical framework. In this group, the studies on 'Management Practice of Political Resources' had the highest concentration of philosophical and theoretical frameworks of analysis (46.4%), and were more used in the theme of 'Motivation' with references to the 'psychodynamics of work of Cristophe Dejours' and in the theme of 'Leadership', with references to the 'Managerial Grid theory of Robert Rogers Blake and Jane Mouton Srygley' and the 'Grid & Leadership in Nursing Instrument' developed by Maria Auxiliadora Trevizan (nurse).

Finally, still in this group, the works on 'Management Practices of Human Resources' had a considerable percentage of philosophical and theoretical frameworks of analysis (33.1%), which were more employed in the theme 'Sizing', with references to the 'sizing methods and instruments of the nursing workforce', of the nurses Raquel Rapone Gaidzinski and Maria Fernanda Togeiro Fugulin. In the theme of 'Continuing Education' there were references to 'educational methods of the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Reglus Neves Freire'.

CONCLUSION

Most works on NA result from quantitative studies, appearing for the first time in theses defended in 1975, employed more often in Master's titles and concentrated in products of studies on Resource Management Practices and Intervention Methods.

Regarding the methodological objective and temporality, the descriptive and cross-sectional studies stood out, prevalent in doctoral theses and in the works

on Intervention Methods and Resource Management Practices.

In relation to the data collection procedure, the case studies began in 1979, predominantly in the master's theses, concentrated in works on 'Management Practice of Political Resources'.

The most used methodological guideline in the analysis and understanding of research works on NA was the positivism, appearing for the first time in theses defended in 1963 and concentrated in master's productions.

The theoretical frameworks predominated in doctoral works, appearing for the first time in theses defended in 1977 and concentrated in works on the 'Management Practice of Political Resources'.

The comparison of the scientific production of specialization postgraduate programs on NA with methodological proposals of reference demonstrated the existence of significant gaps in study designs and that the methodological profile of this production consists predominantly of traditional methods, flexible research techniques and theoretical and philosophical frameworks of poor variance. This brings the important reflection on the challenge of internationalization of postgraduate programs and the development of network research as potentially transformative strategies.

The result of this study can guide the scientific community dedicated to the study of NA in proposing sophisticated study designs of greater variety, including those directed to hypothesis testing and the epistemology of knowledge on NA.

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