



ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

DEATH IN THE PROCESS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN NURSING: THINKING IN THE LIGHT OF THE THOUGHT OF GADAMER

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 22nd May, 2018
Received in revised form
27th June, 2018
Accepted 03rd July, 2018
Published online 30th August, 2018

Key Words:

Nursing,
Death,
Teaching.

ABSTRACT

This philosophical essay aims to reflect on the problem of death in nursing education from Gadamerian philosophy. Nurses have an important role to patients' needs in the process of death, and to their families who are often not prepared for the end. Although in their training process, these professionals are trained to perform complex procedures and handling devices, they are not prepared to deal with issues related to the end of life. We observe that the discussion on the finiteness of life takes up minimal space in the curricula of the nursing course, and it needs to be considered as a fundamental part in nurses' training. For teachers, this theme comes as a difficulty, which shows the need to think about death within the training process to work in the health area. Thus, we believe that the inclusion of philosophical and psychological subjects that address this topic in an interdisciplinary form, will give opportunities to confront death in a more natural way, both personally and professionally. This approach should occur from the beginning of the nurses' qualification, giving death education a space in the curricula.

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Citation: Cleber Lopes Campelo, Helder Machado Passos, Santana de Maria Alves de Sousa et al., 2018. "Death in the process of teaching and learning in Nursing: thinking in the light of the thought of Gadamer", *International Journal of Development Research*, 8, (08), 22197-22199.

INTRODUCTION

With a great concern for science and scientific method, Hans-Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher, devoted part of his studies to topics related to health sciences, raising reflections and discussions present in the practice, although he was not an expert in the area. He presents a way of philosophizing, idealized through dialogue that concerns to our way of

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thinking and acting, and he was considered the greatest name of Philosophical Hermeneutics (Reimão, 2010; Araujo et al., 2007). The concepts or conceptions of death are varied, but it is evident that all of them have something in common: they deal with the end of vital functions and the separation of the body and soul (Bernieri and Hirdes, 2007). Gadamer brings a reflection on death, not only as a simple transformation of its image through time, but of its disappearance in modern contemporary society (Gadamer, 2011). Discussions about death and the performance of multiprofessional teams facing this stage of life are frequent and go beyond the limits of health services. Health professionals routinely live with life

and death, and are prepared to look for life preservation, often at all costs. To do so, they use all available technological resources in order to try to slow death (Costa and Lima, 2005). Often, nurses are exposed to situations in which they have to face death. As they devote themselves to take care of the others, in the attempt to preserve life, when death occurs, this situation is sometimes seen as a failure, they experience feelings of impotence and frustration as they do not know when or how it will come, and, on the edge, how to avoid it. This unpredictability of death usually finds people unprepared, because finitude is not always part of the plans of the human being (Oliveira *et al.*, 2011). Nurses play an important role in the face of the needs of patients in the process of death, and their families, who are often not prepared to experience the end. Although during their training process, these professionals are trained to perform complex procedures, manipulate appliances, act promptly, they are not always prepared to deal with questions about death and dying (Costa and Lima, 2005; Medeiros and Lustosa, 2011; Lima *et al.*, 2018). When thinking on how difficult it is to confront the moment of death in the nurse professional practice, the following question arises: how is the problem of death addressed during the nurses' qualification? Faced with this concern directly related to the activity of these professionals, and in the light of the thought of Gadamer, this essay proposes a reflection on issues related to the academic preparation of nurses for the assistance of the death process and dying.

The experience of death in nursing education

Historically, nursing education as a science has been based on the promotion, prevention and recovery of health. Nursing courses favor education for life, valuing survival in all its forms (Gurgel *et al.*, 2010). Nurses are the professionals that the patient and their family often look for when they need immediate care or clarification, so this type of attendance demands, besides the technical knowledge about the disease and care, skills to deal with the feelings of their clients and their own emotions in the face of critical situations (Sousa *et al.*, 2009). In other words, the tasks of these professionals are not only restricted to saving lives, but also tied to the moment when there are no more possibilities for treatment. The model of academic training focused on the maintenance of life at any cost, imposes barriers to develop and consolidate interpersonal relationships between the professional and the critical patient and their families in the therapeutic environment. Discussions on death occupies minimal space in nursing curricula, and it is reduced to the study of the post-mortem body care. Thus, the subject is rarely thought on a theoretical approach with all the aspects that permeate this phenomenon; the approach is restricted to the technical content that death determines (Oliveira *et al.*, 2011). As a result, learning ends up happening in the practice, when students experience death unexpectedly and take the event as a failure of nursing care. This creates a sense of unpreparedness to confront the situation and support the families of patients who died. Prepared essentially for care during the vital cycle and the cure of diseases, many nurses end up subjugating the problem of death in their professional activity, promoting the progressive disappearance of the image of death from the students' and professionals' daily life (Gurgel *et al.*, 2010). This disappearance is discussed by Gadamer (Gadamer, 2011), and he claims that death has become a negative point and that technological advances, such as those used by health professionals in the attempt to maintain patients' lives, eventually become instruments to extend dying.

Given this, we perceive the relationship between "theoretical knowledge" and practical action, present on the conditions of the modern science way of functioning. Addressing death in a negative way, i.e. the maintenance of the living body through professional and technological efforts, contributes to a gap in the formation of these professionals (Bellato *et al.*, 2007). In our culture, death is often represented by dread and non-acceptance. In this sense, nursing professionals experience the constant challenge of fighting for life and against death, taking for themselves the responsibility to save, heal or alleviate. This, therefore, requires a qualification that allows the deal with this phenomenon as natural (Sousa *et al.*, 2009). However, what we can observe is not the experience of death inserted in the process of life, but the experience of doing, trying to maintain life. For nursing, knowledge cannot be understood as a simple practice, but as the dialectic joint of theory and practical action in which reason (theory) determines the way men act, and human action (practice), is designed, thought, becomes aware and rational (Queiroz *et al.*, 2015). So, the nurses' qualification should be done through the articulation between basic disciplines of sociological, philosophical, psychological and vocational character, changing the focus on death and dying, admitting its reality, opening up space for an education for death, because debating this thematic is essential for vocational training (Oliveira *et al.*, 2011). Education for death must be thought as a fundamental part of health professionals training, specially nursing professionals, who routinely live with serious patients and are more exposed to this phenomenon; educating for death should be object of vocational training to prepare them for this confrontation (Kovacs, 2005). We can observe, in the face of the problem presented, that people stopped thinking on their finitude, removing mythology from death, because of the advances of modern natural science, and the technological domination of death. The question of death has always been one of the foundations of philosophy, and philosophizing has sometimes been understood as a preparation for death (Gadamer, 2011).

Anguish of death experienced by teachers

Another important point to discuss is the discomfort presented by teachers when teaching about this topic in the classroom. The fear of death is a primitive situation for the human being and the anguish about life keeps man distant from finitude. Gadamer further states that we are sure of the things we know and the repression of death is the will to live (Gadamer, 2011). Working death in didactic environments is a stressful and complex practice, even for more experienced teachers. A phenomenological study conducted with teachers who experience daily death with students in the educational practice, evidence that educators feel profound helplessness (anguish) when facing, along with the students, the process of death (Carvalho and Valle, 2006). In this context, teachers have approached the assistance to the death process, only when it happens, quickly and superficially, as a way to protect themselves and the students, and generally without deepening on the subject. Here, it remains our essential tension between consciousness about our own finitude and the impetus of not wanting to know that we are beings for death (Gadamer, 2011). A research conducted at a public university in the central-west region of Brazil with the objective of knowing how the teachers approach this thematic in their subjects, revealed that 76.5% of the teachers have the opportunity to address this topic in their subjects. However, when questioned

about the content approach, 73.5% of them replied that they did not do so (Bellato *et al.*, 2007). This shows that the training of nurses has been insufficient in terms of understanding death, because this preparation has hardly been done in a theoretical-reflexive manner. Some teachers find it difficult to face this phenomenon as an integral part of life, which reveals the need to think on death during nurses' education. To Gadamer, the progress of science lives thanks its constant self-correction and, in the same way, scientific praxis requires, through continuous correction, the elevation of the level of authenticity and expectations invested in it (Gadamer, 2011). Other teachers feel unprepared to teach this topic, giving a superficial approach to the theme.

However, they recognize the necessity and inevitability of teaching how to take care of people on the verge of death (Pinho and Barbosa, 2008). Gadamer considers that every understanding or comprehension is essentially based on dialogue and that it is through thorough study that we acquire knowledge (LAWN, 2007). He proposes to think of a human, social practice based both on the mechanical application of the technique, and showing that there are other ways to know the reality. His central question is to understand human experience, knowledge and human action (GADAMER, 2008). Starting from the author's thought, the malaise about death may be the result of this lack of dialogue in the nurses' education, where the biomedical aspects of the death process are privileged, leaving aside the philosophical reflections that the thematic demands. Accepting the limits of the profession from the nurses qualification and accepting the reality of the finitude, sharing the feelings of insecurity and discomfort, opening space to the new meanings of death in the personal field, should be the path during nurses' training (Oliveira *et al.*, 2012).

Final considerations

Death is an inherent matter to the human being and we all experience this process. Philosophical, sociological and psychological disciplines that approach this thematic in an interdisciplinary manner during nurses' training will facilitate the understanding and confrontation of death both in the personal and professional field. It is clear that teachers and students are unprepared to face death, suggesting that the current panorama should be modified. It is necessary to open space for the education for death, where the dialogue should allow deepening on the theme since the beginning of their qualification, making them understand the process is natural and not experiencing it as failure or frustration. Reflecting on death will allow nursing students and teachers to experience this process calmer and open new perspectives on this stage of life, leading to a practice closer to the human reality that necessarily assumes birth, living and dying.

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