

Relevance of intersubjectivity for understanding the low self-esteem of nursing students

Relevância da intersubjetividade para a compreensão da baixa autoestima do estudante de enfermagem
Relevancia de la intersubjetividad para comprender la baja autoestima de los estudiantes de enfermería

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Abstract

Objective: To reflect on the low self-esteem of nursing students in the light of the theoretical framework of the philosopher Alfred Schütz. **Methods:** This is a theoretical-reflective study, based on scientific literature and authorial experience as a research resource, developed from September to December 2020. **Results:** The self-esteem phenomenon can be seen through an intersubjective dimension, making it possible to understand the influence of life contexts (personal, social, professional) and academic experiences on the psychic illness of nursing students. Low self-esteem can impair academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and quality of life. And also cause self-destructive behavior, lower self-efficacy and abandonment of the course. **Conclusion:** Recognizing the intersubjectivity in this phenomenon enables the awakening and encouragement for discussions about the factors that affect psychological well-being and helps in the process of identifying the human responses of students with low self-esteem and planning comprehensive and holistic care.

Descriptors: Nursing; Self-image; Nursing Education; Philosophy in Nursing; Nursing students.

Whats is already known on this?

The literature shows low self-esteem in nursing undergraduate students. Intersubjectivity enables individualized care by recognizing the life world of the other. There is a shortage of studies on the subject.

What this study adds?

Intersubjectivity contributes to the understanding of low self-esteem in nursing students. This makes it possible to recognize variables involved and plan care aimed at the students' psychological well-being in the academic context.



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Resumo

Objetivo: Refletir sobre a baixa autoestima do estudante de enfermagem à luz do referencial teórico do filósofo Alfred Schütz. **Métodos:** Trata-se de um estudo teórico-reflexivo, fundamentado em literatura científica e experiência autoral como recurso de investigação, desenvolvido de setembro a dezembro do ano de 2020. **Resultados:** O fenômeno autoestima pode ser visto por uma dimensão intersubjetiva, possibilitando compreender a influência dos contextos de vida (pessoal, social, profissional) e das experiências acadêmicas no adoecimento psíquico do estudante de enfermagem. A baixa autoestima pode prejudicar o desempenho acadêmico, o relacionamento interpessoal e a qualidade de vida, bem como ocasionar comportamento autodestrutivo, menor autoeficácia e abandono do curso. **Conclusão:** Reconhecer a intersubjetividade nesse fenômeno possibilita o despertar e o incentivo para discussões sobre os fatores que afetam o bem-estar psicológico e auxilia no processo de identificação das respostas humanas dos alunos com baixa autoestima e planejar o cuidado integral e holístico.

Descritores: Enfermagem; Autoimagem; Educação em Enfermagem; Filosofia em Enfermagem; Estudantes de enfermagem.

Resumen

Objetivo: Reflexionar sobre la baja autoestima de los estudiantes de enfermería a la luz del marco teórico del filósofo Alfred Schütz. **Métodos:** Se trata de un estudio teórico-reflexivo, basado en la literatura científica y la experiencia del autor como recurso de investigación y que fue desarrollado de septiembre a diciembre de 2020. **Resultados:** El fenómeno de la autoestima puede ser visto desde una dimensión intersubjetiva, permitiendo comprender la influencia de los contextos de vida (personal, social, profesional) y de las experiencias académicas sobre la enfermedad psíquica de estudiantes de enfermería. La baja autoestima puede perjudicar el rendimiento académico, las relaciones interpersonales y la calidad de vida. Y todavía provocar conductas autodestructivas, menor autoeficacia y abandono de la carrera. **Conclusión:** Reconocer la intersubjetividad en este fenómeno posibilita despertar y fomentar discusiones sobre los factores que afectan el bienestar psicológico y ayuda en el proceso de identificación de las respuestas humanas de los estudiantes con baja autoestima y a partir de ese reconocimiento poder planificar una atención integral y holística.

Descritores: Enfermería; Auto imagen; Educación en Enfermería; Filosofía en Enfermería; Estudiantes de enfermería.

INTRODUCTION

Nursing is surrounded by the technical and social division of labor, as well as by socio-political aspects resulting from conflicts that emerge daily in professional relationships and environments, whether in care or teaching. In the context of higher education in nursing, students also face challenges in professional training, which can generate emotional instability and psychological disorders.⁽¹⁾

During the academic trajectory, it is possible to mention as difficulties: being away from the home of family members, change in daily routine, need for greater responsibility and organization and professional experience in the fields of assistance, among others. As a consequence, there are: excessive worries, anxiety and emotional instability, reverberating in vulnerability to stress, anxiety disorders and low self-esteem, which is very related to self-destructive behavior, lower self-efficacy and abandonment of the course.⁽²⁾

Self-esteem levels influence and are influenced by the success and/or failure of the teaching-learning process and by interpersonal relationships, since self-esteem is directly related to the individual's appreciation and personal confidence. Thus, self-esteem can be understood as a complex of feelings and thoughts about oneself that can reflect positively or negatively.⁽³⁾ It is something that is formed throughout life as a result of accumulated experiences and expresses the ability to face life's challenges in search of the satisfaction of our interests and needs. Thus, self-esteem is usually referred to as being high or low.⁽⁴⁾

A study identified in nursing undergraduate students a high level of low self-esteem, reinforcing that the university experience has negatively influenced the students' perception of themselves, influencing their ability to face the challenges of academic life.⁽⁵⁾ Corroborating this, the literature highlights that the formation of a negative professional self-image expressing oppression, withdrawal and little initiative is also present in this clientele.⁽⁶⁾

Despite the increased discussion on the subject, there is still a need to deepen the knowledge about the reasons involved in the factors that precede and in the consequences of low self-esteem in mental health care in the student population.⁽⁷⁾

Thus, concerns arose about the historical, social, individual and cultural aspects involved in understanding the phenomenon of low self-esteem within the scope of higher education in nursing. It is noteworthy that students may be immersed in contexts permeated by factors that trigger changes in responsiveness and relationships, increasing the possibilities of low levels of self-esteem.⁽²⁾ In this sense, it is relevant to reflect on self-esteem under an intersubjective dimension.

It is in this context that the relevance of the use of Alfred Schütz's theoretical-methodological framework of sociological phenomenology is perceived. It is known that both in health and nursing and in phenomenological sociology, it is intended to understand the subjects and their singularities. To this end,

it is necessary to turn to individuals in order to learn about their experiences in the world of everyday life, which is an intersubjective world, shared among peers.

Thus, the objective of this study was to reflect on the low self-esteem of nursing students in the light of the theoretical framework of the philosopher *Alfred Schütz*.

METHODS

This is a theoretical-reflective study, based on scientific literature and authorial experience as a research resource, on the contribution of phenomenology to nursing research based on the framework of the philosopher *Alfred Schütz*. Based on the interface in the relationship between human beings, whose understanding becomes an important signpost of health care. It was produced in the subject Philosophy and epistemology of science, during the semester 2020.1, from September to December of 2020, in the Graduate Program in Nursing of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte – UFRN.

In the construction of this study, the guidelines of the Standards for reporting qualitative research: a synthesis of recommendations were adopted.⁽⁸⁾ The data sources adopted were the book: *El problema de la realidad social*⁽⁹⁾ and articles published in indexed journals in electronic format, in order to provide subsidies for understanding the investigated theme. The presentation of the reflections in this study is conducted in such a way that the interpretations can give an understanding of the intersubjective dimension of low self-esteem in nursing students.

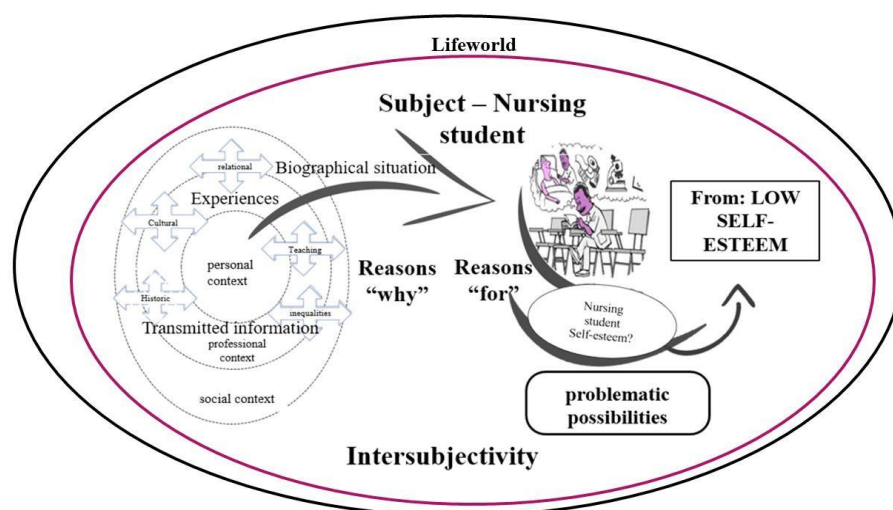
Thus, as a structure, the study will consist of two reflective moments, namely: “From the world of life that is intersubjective: perceptions of academic daily life” (the connection of self-esteem with intersubjectivity will be examined); “From the reasons for your actions: the reasons involved in low self-esteem” (we seek to reflect the intrinsic motivations in the development of the low self-esteem phenomenon categorized into “reasons for” and “reasons why”).

RESULTS END DISCUSSION

From the world of life that is intersubjective: perceptions of academic daily life

The understanding of a phenomenon only becomes viable when there is an apprehension of the world of the subjects' lives. From this, it is understood that the world of life of nursing students involves the biographical situation, which existed before contact with the university and the current experiences, through the academic daily life. That said, the low self-esteem phenomenon can be seen by an intersubjective dimension (Figure 1), as it is associated with social relations, life stories, actions, and ways of reactions that individuals have from the situations experienced and their motivations.

Figure 1. Graphic representation of the conceptual reflection of intersubjectivity by Alfred Schutz in the phenomenon of low self-esteem in nursing students. Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Brasil, 2023.



Source: Elaboration of authorship with adaptations of Google Images (2023).

Thus, it is apprehended that nursing students are immersed in a world of life with interdependent contexts, for example: the personal (they bring the baggage of the family and social interactions of their

own order); the university and social (they experience daily interactions of an educational order in society) and experience in practical activities the scenario of the profession (are related to professional practice, historical, ethical, financial dilemmas immersed in the world of work). These phenomena are related to cognitive reality, which is incorporated into the processes of human subjective experiences.⁽⁹⁾ Then, the subject has experiences of various orders that make up a world of intersubjective life.

In addition, the nursing students are biographically situated in the world of life. Through the singular history of the individuals and the sedimentation of their experiences and the knowledge acquired in the trajectory, it will be possible to compose their baggage of available knowledge. From the experiences of oneself, with another, one encounters intersubjectivity, which can be understood in the experiences in the world with men among other men, with whom one is linked with exultation and common works, one understands the others and is understood by them.⁽⁹⁾

The world of everyday life is understood as a natural and social scenario, which puts limits on human actions. The subject not only integrates the habitat, but also acts on it. Daily life is the place of reality in which the individual can intervene and modify. Only in this context can the human being be understood by his fellow human beings and interact with them.⁽⁹⁾

The world of life is a universe of meanings, it is a texture of meaning that must be interpreted to guide and lead in it. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt the conception that this world is not a private world, but an intersubjective world. Thus, knowledge about it is not an individual matter, but one that must be socialized from the beginning. Only a part of the knowledge of the world originates from singular experience. The other is of social origin, which has been transmitted by relationships with parents, friends, teachers, that is, in contact with the other.⁽⁹⁾

In this perspective, it is thought that one is born inserted in everyday life and in it is produced by the actions of lives. Young people, as agents of change, influence and are influenced, according to the situation they experience. In the family and among friends, they are more independent and influencers. However, when they see themselves as students, they feel, as a rule, insecure and frustrated because their actions are little respected and even ignored. Thus, they often feel little or no motivation - which can impair learning - because the most significant factor to consider in relation to good academic performance is motivation.⁽¹⁰⁾

Thus, the construction of experiences can describe how the elements of this world affect the senses and how they are perceived. When considering the nursing students, it can be identified in the period of experiences in the academic environment, that they go through situational crises, since facing the unknown causes several conflicts to be experienced - problematic possibilities. This generates an emotional imbalance, due to the insecurity that has arisen in this new phase, which can contribute to situations of psychological suffering.⁽¹¹⁾

The world of everyday life is the setting and also the object of actions and interactions. The actions of academics are driven by their motivations and learning situations. In the daily lives of students, it is necessary to experience the care of people, healthy or sick. And it requires these subjects to activate actions and perceptions aimed at the client's well-being and quality of life, which sometimes leads to forgetfulness of self-care. In addition, failure to adapt to new experiences or the new environment may constitute a stress-causing factor for the student, which generates organic problems, relationship difficulties, low school productivity, anguish, depression, apathy and low self-esteem.⁽¹⁾

Regarding self-esteem, it was based on the conceptual explanation that this is an attitude that people develop about themselves, associating them with skills, social relationships and future perspectives.⁽¹²⁾ It is essential for the health, quality of life and happiness of an individual, since it influences the behavior of each one.⁽¹³⁾ Self-esteem exists simultaneously with distinct personality traits and characteristics, affective predispositions, motivations and forms of cognitive processing, which indicates that its influence on the functioning of each person may be different.⁽¹⁴⁾

The world of everyday action, on the other hand, is the archetype of experience in relation to reality and all other spheres of meaning can be considered as its modifications. Thus, in the world of life, there is a distinction between domains that involve different degrees of relationships between social actors and between these and other worlds.⁽⁹⁾ There is the possibility of synchronizing self-esteem as intersubjective, since nursing students produce multiple meanings and establish relationships with other subjects, through the connections of time and common spaces. This conforms as a structure of sense that must be interpreted through actions and the recognition of our reactions.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy for the understanding that the simplest interaction of ordinary life presupposes a series of common sense constructions, in this case, constructions of the expected conduct of the other. It is in interactions with others that the human being points out his abilities and qualities, as a multidimensional being, is driven incessantly by the desire to know more, to be more, to live more and to have a better quality of life, producing ideals marked by the uniqueness of the different ways of being, living and coexisting.⁽¹⁵⁾ The determinants involved in the intersubjective sense of self-esteem will be explored in the following topic.

The reasons for your actions: the reasons wrapped in low self-esteem

Since childhood, the individual continuously has a large amount of recipes that he uses as techniques to understand, or at least control, aspects of his experience. The abundance of his experience typically apprehended and interpreted serves as the basis for his subsequent action, which is named as the baggage of available knowledge. In this context of experience, there are motivations and objectives, for which men act, being called "reasons for"; and when the reasons for actions are rooted in lived experiences, they are called "reasons why".⁽⁹⁾

When faced with the phenomenon studied in this work: self-esteem in nursing students, facts versus levels can be observed, with this, high or low self-esteem depends on how the people look and many factors that can affect them in a negative or positive way.⁽¹⁶⁾ For example, the effect of receiving negative grades in decreasing self-esteem is moderated by the importance attributed to academic success for their self-worth.^(17,18)

Similarly, people who base self-esteem on approval by others end up suffering a decrease in self-esteem when they are the target of negative comments, unlike those whose self-esteem is not so dependent on the approval of others.⁽¹⁶⁾ In these cases, one can trigger the avoidance of social contexts, developing disorders such as social anxiety.⁽¹⁸⁾ There are also relationships between self-esteem and mental health problems, which identified depression, anxiety, stress, that is, as mental health problems prevail, a lower self-esteem can be perceived.⁽¹⁹⁾

Research has shown that self-esteem is an indicator that reflects mental health, as it measures psychic stability in the face of various challenging aspects of life.⁽¹⁶⁾ Low self-esteem integrates contexts in different domains (personal, social, school), including psychological health and academic performance. Thus, it is important to understand this phenomenon in the university environment, considering the psychological aspects in identity and professional training, as they influence the experience of the course during graduation.⁽²⁰⁾

In addition, subjects susceptible to mental problems are more likely to have negative self-assessments.⁽²¹⁾ Psychic distress among university students is also associated with several factors, such as academic pressure, coping skills, economy and social communication.⁽²²⁾ It is believed that economic vulnerability influences the reduction of access to health and leisure, which can result in psychological changes, among which is the decrease in self-esteem.⁽²³⁾

Therefore, low levels of self-esteem rely on experiencing difficult situations to the detriment of indulging in them. Therefore, the person's self-evaluations become negative and set aside the positive evaluations that other significant people may make of them. Low self-esteem is associated with intersubjective perceptions, which causes negative mood, low performance, disability, delinquency, depression and social anxiety.⁽²³⁾

Thus, self-esteem depends on social relations, which can be understood as an intersubjective connection of motives. Thus, it should be noted that the "reasons for" my performance are "reasons why" of the other's reaction and vice versa. This possibility of communication influences the existence of a reference scheme that is common to our actions. The sense that the world has for other actors has for me. This is the reciprocity and interchangeability of perspectives that brings meaning to the experience, and leads to questioning about the motives of others as a basis for understanding social interaction.⁽²⁴⁾

In this sense, being a university student ends up generating in the student thoughts about the importance of his role for his family and demands around results, which have repercussions on demands in the face of working conditions and financial return.⁽²⁵⁾ As in every moment of life that requires concentration, effort and learning, students are susceptible to emotions that are reflected in weakness, discouragement, depression, anxiety or even in more vulnerable situations such as drug use and diseases.⁽²⁶⁾

In this regard, it is reiterated that the university environment exposes the student to daily situations that require adaptations and these can influence self-esteem, such as: the new scenario, often different and distant from the context of life and its expectations; as well as the characteristics of professional training, such as: the contexts of practice, the differences between what is learned in theory and the reality they face, the submission to evaluation processes, the fulfillment of an extensive weekly load, in addition to the suggestion and obligation of complementary workloads in the participation of research groups, outreach projects, monitoring, events and the realization of updating courses.⁽²⁷⁾

It should also be noted that, when dealing with human limits, some students have difficulties and develop feelings of incapacity in relation to the activities required during professional training, which favors the decrease of their academic performance and interferes with the quality of nursing care provided during internships.⁽²⁸⁾ In addition to the variable relationship with teachers and the dimensions related to the demands of the training environment for the level of knowledge required, which in the demonstration of dissatisfaction produce in students the feeling that their practices were insufficient.⁽²⁴⁾ Thus, a situation begins in which emotional instability can influence the evaluation of curricular demands and lead these undergraduate students to obtain a negative self-image.

In considering the immersion of interpretative sociology, one comes across Schütz, who considers man as a being, in principle, free to decide on the course of his actions or decide to refrain from acting.⁽⁹⁾ The meaning of actions arises from the freedom to behave in one way and not in another. Choices are made through processes.⁽²⁴⁾

The world of everyday life is not a proven world, but an intersubjective world, where students relate and share, experience and interpret with the similar dimensions common in the university context. These are found within a historically given world, which both as a world of nature and as a sociocultural world, existed before birth and will continue to exist after death. Thus, the world is not individual, but constitutes the environment of others. Acts on others and is affected by them.⁽⁹⁾

Thus, it is observed, in the analysis of human behavior, that interpersonal relationships can contribute to the occurrence of psychological phenomena, such as those correlated with low levels of self-esteem.⁽²⁶⁾ As well as, a relationship was found with aspects of the spiritual dimension, especially in situations of coping with diseases and grief.⁽²³⁾

Therefore, the triggering of low self-esteem in nursing students occurs in the articulation of action projects, producers of meanings in the face of the reasons that move the experiences in an intersubjective environment.

It is elucidated that the understanding of the “reasons why” enables the understanding, in retrospect⁽⁹⁾, of the actions of nursing students. And, the “reasons for” indicate the goals of the actions⁽⁹⁾, the subjective aspect that one wishes to achieve. Thus, understanding them is configured as a way to apprehend the intentionality of actions and, thus, to perceive the motivations, reasons and objectives in the face of academic activities. This makes it possible to recognize the variables involved in the diagnosis of low self-esteem and to plan care aimed at the students’ psychological well-being in the academic context.

The main limitations are related to the fact that this theoretical reflection presents initial and general approximations on the intersubjectivity in the self-esteem phenomenon in nursing students. Thus, it is expected the development of investigations that deepen nursing students to understand the phenomenon of low self-esteem. Finally, strategies should be formulated to promote better levels and quality of life in the academic world of the future professional nurses.

As contributions, this study enables the awakening and encouragement of discussions on the theme in the health area and assists in the process of recognizing the intersubjectivity of this phenomenon in nursing students. Based on this study, it is possible to direct the reflections of nursing professionals during the process of identifying human responses, in addition to being a theoretical support to support the planning of a more holistic and specialized nursing care plan that seeks to meet the needs of nursing students with low self-esteem, enabling a greater chance of achieving good health outcomes.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the contexts (personal, social, professional) together with academic experiences have negatively influenced the perception that undergraduate nursing students have of themselves, influencing their ability to face the challenges of university life. These implications in student life result in low self-esteem of the students, causing psycho-emotional damage, which damages the appreciation of oneself, attitudes and beliefs about one's own skills, capacities, social relationships and future events.

Therefore, recognizing intersubjectivity in the phenomenon of low self-esteem makes it possible to awaken and encourage reflections on the factors that affect psychic illness in nursing students. Faced with this problem, there is a need to look at the mental health of university students in nursing courses, seeking to understand the students in their entirety.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Contributed to the conception or design of the study/research: Santos LV, Santos VEP, Lira ALBC. Contributed to data collection Santos LV, Santos VEP, Lira ALBC. Contributed to the analysis and/or interpretation of data: Santos LV, Dantas JR, Santos VEP, Lira ALBC. Contributed to article writing or critical review: Santos LV, Dantas JR, Santos VEP, Lira ALBC. Final approval of the version to be published: Santos LV, Dantas JR, Santos VEP, Lira ALBC.

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