

# PLEASURE AND SUFFERING AT WORK: PERSPECTIVES OF NURSING PROFESSORS

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## PRAZER E SOFRIMENTO NO TRABALHO: PERSPECTIVAS DE DOCENTES DE ENFERMAGEM

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## PLACER Y SUFRIMIENTO EN EL TRABAJO: PERSPECTIVAS DE DOCENTES DE ENFERMERÍA

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**How to cite this article:** D'Oliveira CAFB, Almeida CM, Souza NVDO, Pires AS, Madriaga LCV. Pleasure and suffering at work: perspectives of nursing professors. Rev baiana enferm. 2017;31(3):e20297.

**Objectives:** to describe the activities developed by nursing professors and to analyze their perception of work activities, considering situations that cause pleasure and suffering. **Method:** a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory study was performed. The place of collection was the school of nursing of a public university in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Southeast of Brazil. Participants were 16 nursing professors. Data were collected with the application of a semi-structured interview and treated with content analysis. **Results:** professors developed a series of activities that create feelings of pleasure, while causing suffering as well. **Conclusions:** pleasure and suffering are found in the routine of professors. In addition, suffering refers to questions associated with neoliberal concepts, which have been the foundation of work development in public education services.

**Descriptors:** Education, Nursing. Quality of life. Faculty. Occupational health.

*Objetivos: descrever as atividades desenvolvidas pelos docentes de enfermagem e analisar a percepção desses profissionais acerca de suas atividades no trabalho, considerando as situações geradoras de prazer e de sofrimento. Método: pesquisa qualitativa, descritiva e exploratória. O cenário de coleta foi uma faculdade de enfermagem pertencente a uma universidade pública do município do Rio de Janeiro. Os participantes foram 16 docentes de enfermagem. Os dados foram coletados mediante aplicação de entrevista semiestruturada e tratados por meio da análise de conteúdo. Resultados: evidenciou-se que o docente desenvolve uma diversidade de atividades que permitem a sensação de prazer e também remetem ao sofrimento. Conclusão: o prazer e o sofrimento estão presentes no cotidiano docente, sendo o sofrimento referido a questões atreladas aos preceitos neoliberais, que vêm fundamentando o desenvolvimento do trabalho nos serviços de ensino público.*

*Descritores: Educação em enfermagem. Qualidade de vida. Docentes. Saúde do trabalhador.*

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*Objetivos: describir las actividades desarrolladas por los docentes de enfermería y analizar la percepción de esos profesionales sobre sus actividades en el trabajo, considerando las situaciones generadoras de placer y de sufrimiento. Método: investigación con enfoque cualitativo, descriptivo y exploratorio. El escenario de la recolecta fue una facultad de enfermería perteneciente a una universidad pública del municipio de Rio de Janeiro. Los participantes fueron 16 docentes de enfermería. Los datos fueron recolectados mediante entrevista semiestructurada y tratados a través del análisis de contenido. Resultados: Se constató que el docente desarrolla una variedad de actividades que lo conducen a una sensación de placer y, también, lo remiten al sufrimiento. Conclusión: el placer y el sufrimiento están presentes en el cotidiano docente, siendo el sufrimiento referido a cuestiones relacionadas a los preceptos neoliberales, que vienen orientando el desarrollo del trabajo en los servicios de enseñanza pública.*

*Descritores: Educação em enfermagem. Qualidade de vida. Docentes. Saúde do trabalhador.*

## Introduction

The present study is aimed at nursing professors' perspective of their work, considering the experiences of pleasure and/or suffering originated from teaching in a public university.

Feelings of pleasure and suffering in the work environment and towards work are dialectic and dynamic. These feelings are present in the subjective dimension of individuals, as they involve aspirations, values, desires, and ideals. However, the work process and organization have an effect on such feelings<sup>(1)</sup>. Thus, depending on the way these two elements are designed, when they are confronted with workers' psychophysical and social characteristics, pleasure or suffering can appear. Additionally, the world of work and human beings have a dynamic nature, as they are influenced by historical, political, economic, and social aspects that are changeable<sup>(2)</sup>.

The dialectics that permeate these two feelings is associated with the fact that suffering is always present in the work environment, as work activity is frequently thought about by some, but executed by others. In this sense, there is an initial shock due to unfamiliarity and displeasure, which can become pleasure if workers manage to change the situations that have a negative impact on the subjective dimension. Thus, if the work organization enables dialogue, the use of workers' creativity and autonomy in the execution of tasks, aiming to transform what causes suffering into something different which is in agreement with their aspirations, the initial suffering subsequently becomes pleasure<sup>(3)</sup>.

Pleasure is understood as a sensation of well-being and plenitude, thus being a booster or a way to recover health. Such feeling is associated with the experience of life, desires, values, and the social and psychological construction that designs the life of each human being<sup>(1,4)</sup>. Additionally, other factors are connected to the feeling of pleasure, such as access to assets and consumption, the perceived income, the recognition for the work performed, the sense of usefulness of work, and the configuration of socioeconomic structure in which one is included<sup>(5)</sup>.

In contrast, suffering is the pulsing energy that does not find a way to be released in the exercise of work, building up in the psychic system and causing a feeling of displeasure and tension. In the work environment, suffering appears when individual aspirations, desires and values clash against work organization recommendations, apart from the fact that workers use their defense mechanisms to transform or adapt to a situation unsuccessfully<sup>(3)</sup>.

Continuous suffering is a determinant for the onset of diseases. In this sense, suffering can generate psychosomatic and mental diseases if the work organization does not recognize the work developed neither symbolically nor materially, does not give room to creativity, hinders autonomy and neutralizes dialogue with workers<sup>(6)</sup>.

Teaching is a complex social practice, which integrates knowledge, abilities, attitudes, expectations, and distinct aspects that are

conditioned by the different worldviews of professors; additionally, this is an activity which is strongly influenced by the culture of the institutions where it is performed<sup>(7)</sup>. Thus, the work of professors is not restricted to thinking about the educational action and executing it. Prior to this, it involves thinking about the profession, career and work relationships, in addition to reflecting over the autonomy and responsibility of professors, whether individually or collectively<sup>(8)</sup>.

It should be emphasized that the nursing teaching staff, apart from requiring competences and skills inherent to those of professors, needs to develop certain particularities. For example, in the practical field, performing the supervised internships, nursing professors need to qualify students to be in contact with pain, death, and other conflicting situations that involve care/ the caring process and require students and professors to have special skills<sup>(9)</sup>. Additionally, nursing professors must be in a welcoming work environment, where they can share their concerns with colleagues, aiming to define strategies that improve the teaching-learning process, which occurs both theoretically and practically, requiring psycho-cognitive and motor abilities<sup>(10)</sup>.

During the stage of search for publications on the theme, several studies were found on pleasure and suffering in the work of direct care nurses, although the scientific production on nursing professors and the feelings that emerge from their work activities is scarce. This fact strengthened the motivation for the present study and it was also characterized as a justification to perform it, because it will help to increase the scientific production on this theme.

The present study is relevant, because the consequences of pleasure and suffering in the life of nursing professors will directly affect quality of care, as students will be providing care to the population in the future. Moreover, the feeling of pleasure in the work environment and for one's work protects workers' subjectivity, thus guaranteeing health. On the other hand, if suffering predominates, workers are very likely to

fall ill. Consequently, it is essential to investigate the dynamics of pleasure and suffering in nursing teaching, aiming to gather data that can explain or indicate reasons for falling ill in this professional group.

After the initial contextualization of the object of study, the following objectives were defined: to describe the activities developed by nursing professors in their work routine; and to analyze their perception of the activities they perform in the work environment, considering situations that cause pleasure and suffering.

## Method

This is a study with a qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory design whose setting is the school of nursing of a public university, located in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Southeast of Brazil. This school provides undergraduate and graduate education, in addition to extension courses. The institution in case has four departments: Nursing Fundamentals, Public Health, Medical-Surgical Care and Maternal-Child Care. The teaching staff included 84 professors; however, during data collection, there were 66 professors working in the teaching-learning process. The difference observed is due to the fact that some professors are temporarily transferred to the administration of other public institutions or academic management, or they were on vacation and leaves for different reasons.

Study participants included 16 professors, four selected from each of the previously described departments, who met the following inclusion criteria: to have a government employment career and to have worked in the institution for more than one year (a minimum period for workers to understand the work organization dynamics, aiming to clarify and deepen their perspectives)<sup>(3)</sup>.

Professors who were on vacation or leaves, those who had been temporarily transferred, and those who were directly involved with research (supervisor and professors of the research discipline who were members of the evaluation

committee of the research project that originated the present study) were excluded from this study.

Of all 16 professors selected, 12 were females (75%) and four were males (25%). Regarding their length of time teaching, seven (43.75%) participants had taught for more than 20 years; three (18.75%), between one and five years; three (18.75%), between five and ten years; and three (18.75%), between ten and 15 years.

Regarding the professional qualification of professors, nine (56.25%) had a doctoral degree and seven (43.75%) had a master's degree. Additionally, seven (43.75%) were assistant professors; eight (50%) were adjunct professors; and one (6.25%) was a full professor.

Data collection was performed through the application of an individual semi-structured interview, which included two open questions that asked professors to describe their work routine and feelings of pleasure and/or suffering, considering the execution of their teaching work. Data collection was conducted between July and August 2014.

It should be emphasized that the ethical requirements for human research were met. This research project was registered on Plataforma Brasil and approved under protocol number 799908. All participants signed an Informed Consent Form, in accordance with Resolution number 466/2012 of the National Health Council<sup>(11)</sup>.

Data were analyzed through thematic content analysis, which includes the initiatives of clarification, systematization and expression of the content of messages, aiming to make logical and justified assumptions about such messages<sup>(12)</sup>. The application of this technique enabled the appearance of the category known as "Work experiences and subjectivity of professors", discussed as follows.

## Results and Discussion

With the support of the theoretical framework of work psychodynamics and the content

described by professors, researchers sought to understand their work experience and subjectivity and their feelings of pleasure and/or suffering in the work environment and towards work. In this sense, the attributions of professors were approached, emphasizing the activities performed by them and the translation of their feelings towards the development of activities. Considering the dense content of participants' speech, researchers chose to discuss this content following three sub-categories: Activities developed by professors; Factors that cause pleasure in the work environment of professors; and Factors that cause suffering in the work environment of professors.

### *Activities developed by professors*

The work of professors includes a variety of diverse activities, frequently resulting in these professors exceeding the formal working hours and finishing their tasks at home, aiming to meet the demands.

Among the activities developed by professors, the following were described: teaching classes in undergraduate and/or graduate courses, undergraduate and/or graduate management/coordination, head of department or second in department, scientific production (article preparation), management of students and work in practical fields. Additionally, there is the need for the planning and organization of scientific events, coordination of research and extension projects, participation in the research groups, preparation and correction of exams and papers, and preparation of reports on academic or management data, among others.

*I do academic management, teach, follow students, correct papers, and supervise. I have to read, I have to prepare for classes, I'm invited to participate in evaluation committees out of the university. In short, I don't know how I manage to do all this [...] This multiplicity of tasks causes discomfort, which is when I need to be somewhere and I'm not, because I'm doing something else. (E5).*

Despite the great demand for work, professors affirmed that, in general, work activities were flexible, as they could be performed according to the demand and availability of professionals. This was based on activities that have pre-established days and times, such as giving classes and following students in practical field work. The following report shows this analysis:

*If I tell you that I have a routine, few activities are routine. Because, in practice, the only activity that I can affirm that it's always done the same way is the follow-up of the internship on Mondays [...] But, apart from this, the activities are quite dynamic and flexible to be performed.* (E7).

In addition to the previously mentioned activities, it should also be emphasized that professors dedicate part of their working hours to continuing studies to remain updated and qualified, aiming to perform their work successfully.

*About the classes, you got to have an updated class, you got to search for new evidence on this theme, even if you've been talking about this theme for ten years.* (E2).

*I'm always studying, taking different courses on nursing, psychology, different things.* (E8).

Aiming to perform high-quality teaching activities, professors must reserve some of their working hours to prepare classes that are founded on scientific evidence and, consequently, updated and including theoretical content relevant to the professional practice. In this sense, professors must continuously search the bibliography. Additionally, the need to participate in educational and administrative meetings was observed, creating an instrument to assess or reassess the educational project, among other things<sup>(13)</sup>. In modern times, it can be inferred that this preparation of theoretical content and academic management is facilitated by the use of technologies, such as the Internet, interactive boards and data show<sup>(14)</sup>.

*If I need, I have data show. If I need some material, I can get this to give to the students. If I need to print or get copies of something, we have access to this here now, unlike before.* (E8).

### *Factors that cause pleasure in the work environment of professors*

In this sub-category, professors' feelings of pleasure in the work environment and towards work are evidenced, emphasizing that the relationship between professors and students is gratifying and that it encourages both to change and grow personally and professionally. Moreover, participants perceived a relationship of respect and friendship, thus representing a pleasant work environment, apart from the possibility of following learning and skill acquisition for successful professional exercise.

*The pleasure of being a professor is to be with our students, who stimulate you to learn and teach better and better.* (E16).

*It's to see the growth and the options they have. To me, this is the greatest pleasure of teaching, the relationship of care.* (E10).

Considering the fact that nursing is a predominantly female profession, the possibility of combining household activities and paid work was described as something that leads to pleasure, as it brings safety to also follow their children's growth and development.

*This also brings pleasure to work, when you can do household chores, care for your child, and have a quality paid job out of home.* (E3).

Historically, nursing care is restricted to the ancestral female tradition of caring for the sick and needy, and being submissive to males<sup>(15)</sup>. Thus, in current times, the division of roles between men and women in modern society is the result of several historical processes, including political, social, and economic questions. Nonetheless, this limits women's space in the job market, leading them to choose more female professions, such as nursing, social work, and teaching<sup>(16)</sup>. In this sense, the choice for nursing teaching is understood to be "socially adequate", as these women can work out of their home, in a so-called female profession, while also caring for their children, husband and home<sup>(17-18)</sup>.

Inventiveness, cooperation, trust, the sensation of being socially useful, and recognition for the work performed are essential aspects in the

feeling of pleasure in the work environment<sup>(3,19-20)</sup>. Feelings of pleasure in the work environment are expressed by professors, as they perceive themselves to be a part of the process of construction of a qualified professional, have their work recognized by students, and are able to create with the support of the educational process.

*I think pleasure is connected to the product that you see and that you can achieve [...] when you see a student learning in the classroom, this is wonderful! When you see a former student who comes back to say, "It was so good, I learned so much from you, it really helped me!"*. (E3).

*Students and those who've received a scholarship make me really happy. They look for me during their internship, under my supervision, to develop projects and write papers in the same areas where I do most of my work: vaccination and leprosy. This is a way to be recognized for the good classes I gave or the practice I developed.* (E4).

Moreover, the pleasure of working in the same institution where one had graduated was reported, showing the affection and recognition they have towards it. This situation characterizes the feeling of belonging to a group and the feeling of being welcome in this work environment, which are essential aspects to protect workers' subjectivity and to achieve pleasure<sup>(13,20)</sup>.

*My pleasure was to go back to the institution where I'd graduated, to give back everything I'd received, and to work with such loving people.* (E9).

### *Factors that cause suffering in the work environment of professors*

Professors are constantly required to maintain great high-quality scientific production at university. As previously described, in addition to the activities inherent to the teaching profession (teaching, research, and extension), such as giving classes, developing extension activities, preparing and publishing studies and supervising students, professors also feel they should take on administrative roles (coordination and management) and perform on a graduate level. This demand forces workers to use their psychosomatic energy, causing mental suffering and even work-related diseases<sup>(5,19)</sup>. This situation was perceived in the interviews, revealing the

pressure of productivity, the stressful rhythm of work and the use of time, which should enable leisure time so that tasks can be accomplished, thus showing the subjectivity of professors. Severe mental suffering, especially when one is not able to accomplish tasks in due time, could be observed in the following reports:

*This multiplicity of tasks makes me feel discomfort [...] when I need to be somewhere and I'm not, because I'm busy with another task. I mean, several activities at the same time. And you have to do it all and so it's hard to relax.* (E5).

*My suffering has to do with not being able to do what I'd like to do. So, when I try to do something and I can't achieve my goal, I feel distressed and really sad. The demand is great and everything is important. But how can we do it all? We have to keep working.* (E8).

Work spaces have been following the neoliberal model of productivity, polyvalence and multi-functionality of workers, and the need to have to meet work demands skillfully and competently at all times, showing their capacity for work organization and the group of workers. This situation has had serious negative repercussions, among which are competitiveness and trivialization of social injustices. Additionally, there is little or no feeling of collaboration, friendship and interaction among workers<sup>(5)</sup>. The vulnerabilities in the relationships among professors were revealed in participants' reports and justified by the competitiveness of the academic world. This situation also causes suffering in these professionals.

*I think suffering is good because we often find it hard to deal with our colleagues. Sometimes they turn their back on us. This is what makes us suffer the most! I get disappointed when I see how people are bothered by your success and achievements.* (E9).

*When I rationally analyze the work space where I am, this is totally rational. I think this environment promotes competition and every time we experience this process of alienation and competition, I suffer as a result.* (E7).

As observed, in addition to the activities associated with teaching, the work of a university professor involves research, extension, and other tasks related to academic management. It is a multiplicity of distinct tasks, which relate to the subjectivity of professors who, in their turn, have specific skills and preferences. In this sense, not all activities are pleasurable, nor are they in

agreement with professors' peculiarities. Thus, some reports revealed certain activities that caused suffering:

*Management forces me to perform tasks that I don't like and that I don't think are good for me as a person. I never chose this for me [...] and this makes me suffer. Because I don't have a choice, I feel I need to contribute at this moment, but do I like it? No, I don't like it. (15).*

Another aspect pointed out by professors as a potential cause of suffering was the fact that there are students enrolled in the nursing course, even though they are feeling dissatisfied with their profession. Professors reported their concern about the health care provided by these future nurses and their mental health.

*It makes me suffer to see students enrolled in a nursing course without really enjoying it. Unfortunately, in our profession, many are like this. And this worries me and makes me sad, because I feel this affects the quality of our profession [...] There are many students who tried dentistry or medicine and didn't pass the exams. So they take up nursing. This is sad, I worry about them. (12).*

The concern shown by professors is in agreement with studies that point to the fact that many students in the area of health are taking up courses that were their second choice. Due to the fact that it is more difficult to go into medicine in Brazilian universities, a long period of study is required from students and this means a few years are necessary to pass the entrance exams. Because of this difficulty, apart from the fact that not all adolescents have financial and family support for this process, many end up giving up their first professional choice and attempting to pass the exams for a less popular course, so they can be in the job market more quickly<sup>(21-22)</sup>.

One of the limitations of the present study was the fact that it was performed in a single public institution of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Consequently, this study must be replicated in other public schools of nursing, both on the state and federal levels, in addition to private institutions, aiming to increase and enrich the results obtained.

## Conclusions

The work of nursing professors has been influenced by neoliberal concepts, a situation

that is characterized as the main factor that causes suffering in these professionals. The intense rhythm of work, polyvalence, multi-functionality, the demand for quality and quantity in production, and the continuing training that requires correct judgment and decision-making at all times are factors that result from neoliberal model principles, causing suffering to professors.

This model also led to an increase in competitiveness among workers, who feel compelled to show continuous competence and skills to the work organization and professional group, thus causing social relationships to become vulnerable and fragile. Additionally, leisure, rest, and contact with family members and friends are compromised, as one aims to achieve the goals of teaching productivity.

Additionally, factors inherent to this profession, such as students dissatisfied with the profession, cause professors to suffer. This situation is historical in nursing, as young adults seek social and professional status without considering the objects of work of professions. Moreover, low salaries and poor working conditions have discouraged students and spread the idea that this profession has no prestige. This is an inconvenience and causes suffering to those who dedicate themselves to the nursing career and who are aware of its use and social value.

However, pleasurable factors were identified, such as the relationship between professors and students, the recognition for the work performed and the possibility of combining household and work activities, apart from the possibility of returning to the institution where one graduated, which characterizes the feeling of belonging to a group and being welcome in the work environment.

Thus, the teaching profession is dialectic and feelings of pleasure and suffering are present in the routine of these professionals. However, situations of suffering are alarming factors, as they deteriorate the subjectivity of workers and trigger occupational stress-related diseases, burnout, voluntary servitude syndrome, presenteeism, depression, among others. In this sense, it is important to promote and deepen

studies on the work of nursing professors and the diseases affecting this profession, aiming to develop strategies, actions, and policies that can protect their health.

### Collaborations:

1. study conception, research project, and data analysis and interpretation: Camila Arantes Ferreira Brecht D'Oliveira, Caroline Muller Almeida, Norma Valéria Dantas de Oliveira Souza e Ariane da Silva Pires;

2. article writing and relevant critical review of intellectual content: Camila Arantes Ferreira Brecht D'Oliveira, Caroline Muller Almeida, Norma Valéria Dantas de Oliveira Souza, Ariane da Silva Pires e Luiz Carlos Veiga Madriaga;

3. approval of the final version to be published: Camila Arantes Ferreira Brecht D'Oliveira, Norma Valéria Dantas de Oliveira Souza e Luiz Carlos Veiga Madriaga.

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Received: November 24, 2016

Approved: September 14, 2017

Published: November 20, 2017