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## **Ética No Fazer Profissional Da Enfermagem**

Dalcin, Camila Biazus; Serpa, Rafaela; Santos, Evangelia Kotzias Atherino Dos; Tourinho, Francis Solange Vieira; Rocha, Patricia Kuerten

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# ETHICS IN THE NURSING PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY: REFLECTIONS IN THE LIGHT OF HANNAH ARENDT THOUGHT

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## ÉTICA NO FAZER PROFISSIONAL DA ENFERMAGEM: REFLEXÕES À LUZ DO PENSAMENTO DE HANNAH ARENDT

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### ÉTICA EN LA LABOR DEL PROFESIONAL DE LA ENFERMERÍA: REFLEXIONES A LA LUZ DEL PENSAMIENTO DE HANNAH ARENDT

Camila Biazus Dalcin<sup>1</sup>

Rafaela Serpa<sup>2</sup>

Evangelia Kotzias Atherino dos Santos<sup>3</sup>

Francis Solange Vieira Tourinho<sup>4</sup>

Patrícia Kuerten Rocha<sup>3</sup>

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Objective: to reflect on the ethics of the professional nursing practice, taking into account the concepts of the human condition and the banality of Hannah Arendt's evil. Method: a theoretical and philosophical reflection. Results: reflective critical thinking must be part of the professional nursing practice, in order to accept the human condition – labor, work and action – of ethics in care, thus avoiding fragmentation, errors and mechanization in nursing care. The banality of the evil can be overcome through the continuing education of the nursing professional. Conclusion: using concepts from Hannah Arendt's thinking, the importance of nursing professionals assuming a critical-reflexive posture and non-judgmental ethics is highlighted, highlighting that health education, teamwork and a sense of belonging to the profession nursing, are important elements for professional strengthening.

Descriptors: Ethics. Ethics in Nursing. Professional Practice. Philosophy in Nursing. Professional Ethics. Nursing Care.

*Objetivo: refletir sobre a ética no fazer profissional da enfermagem, levando em consideração os conceitos de condição humana e a banalidade do mal de Hannah Arendt. Método: reflexão teórico-filosófica. Resultados: o pensamento crítico reflexivo deve ser parte do fazer profissional da enfermagem, para que seja aceita a condição humana – o labor, o trabalho e a ação – da ética no cuidado, evitando, assim, fragmentações, erros e mecanização do cuidado de enfermagem. A banalidade do mal pode ser transposta por meio da educação permanente e continuada do profissional de enfermagem. Conclusão: ao utilizar conceitos do pensamento de Hannah Arendt, percebe-se a importância de que o profissional da enfermagem assuma uma postura crítico-reflexiva e ética de não julgamento, destacando-se que a educação em saúde, trabalho em equipe e sentimento de pertencimento à profissão de enfermagem, são elementos importantes para o fortalecimento profissional.*

<sup>1</sup> Nurse. Master in Nursing. Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil. camilabiazus@hotmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Nurse. Specialist in Urgency, Emergency and PHC. Nursing technician at Polydoro Ernani University Hospital of São Thiago. Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil.

<sup>3</sup> Nurse. PhD in Nursing. Professor at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil.

<sup>4</sup> Nurse. PhD in Child and Adolescent Health. Professor at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil.

*Descritores: Ética. Ética em Enfermagem. Prática Profissional. Filosofia em Enfermagem. Ética Profissional. Cuidados de Enfermagem.*

*Objetivo: reflexionar sobre la ética en la labor de los profesionales de la enfermería, considerando los conceptos de la condición humana y la banalidad del mal de Hannah Arendt. Método: reflexión teórico-filosófica. Resultados: el pensamiento crítico reflexivo debe ser parte de la labor de los profesionales de la enfermería, para que se acepte la condición humana (la labor, el trabajo y la acción) de la ética del cuidado; para así evitar fragmentaciones, errores y la mecanización del cuidado de enfermería. La banalidad del mal puede trasponerse por medio de la educación permanente y continuada del profesional de la enferme. Conclusión: al emplear conceptos del pensamiento de Hannah Arendt, se percibe la importancia de que el profesional de enfermería asuma una postura crítico-reflexiva y ética de no emitir juicios, destacándose que la educación en salud, el trabajo en equipo y el sentimiento de pertenencia a la profesión de enfermería son elementos importantes de fortalecimiento profesional.*

*Descritores: Ética. Ética en Enfermería. Práctica Profesional. Filosofía en Enfermería. Ética Profesional. Cuidados de Enfermería.*

## Introduction

Nursing comprises its own component of scientific and technical knowledge, built and reproduced by a set of social, ethical and political practices, which is processed by care, teaching, research and management. Health professionals provide services to people, families and the community in their different contexts and life circumstances<sup>(1)</sup>. Through comprehensive and effective care, nursing essentially takes care of the human being in a multidimensional<sup>(2)</sup>.

In Brazil, nursing is a profession made up mostly of women, who represent the largest workforce in the health area. It is present next to the patient, whether in public or private service, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year<sup>(3)</sup>. With this understanding, it can be said that nursing is a profession with a broad approach and performance, and cannot be understood only by virtue of technique, but also of practice, scientificity, its political and social position, as well as economic, ethical and aesthetics of taking care of others, as a product of professional doing. Nursing aims to improve the other as their professional doing<sup>(1,4)</sup>.

Being a profession committed to the broad concept of health and the quality of life of people, acts in the promotion, prevention, recovery and rehabilitation of health in the context of the Unified Health System (*Sistema Único de Saúde*, SUS)<sup>(5)</sup>. The nursing team, consisting of the nurse, nursing technician, nursing assistant

and midwife, participates in various levels of care and, in the exercise of their functions, does so autonomously and in accordance with the ethical and legal precepts of the profession<sup>(1)</sup>.

Regarding the ethical and legal issues of the nursing profession, it is clear the importance of the theme in the professional day-by-day activity. These issues are associated with organizational situations, complex clinical situations and interpersonal situations, causing moral distress in the professional working in the area<sup>(6-8)</sup>. It is important to emphasize the complexity of ethics in the professional practice and the need to seek broader reflections, because ethics is a collective intelligence that establishes the principles for the good coexistence of a society, which exists because there is freedom. It is not a definite set of laws; it is a reflection on what a social group chooses over a period of time as a reference for behavior. Due to the constant transformation of society, with values not always absolute, ethical thinking should be reflected in the daily lives of social groups, including nursing<sup>(9)</sup>.

The improvement of the ethical behavior of this complex profession is essential and involves the process of building an individual and collective conscience, the social and professional commitment that is expressed in the responsibility of the working relations with reflections in the scientific and political field<sup>(1)</sup>. In this sense, the actions of nursing professionals must be based on

ethics, taking into consideration the commitment to the person who seeks health services and their rights, the values of the profession and the code of ethics, integrating qualified care and respect for free consent and promotion of the patient as a protagonist and subject of care<sup>(10)</sup>.

The concern of Brazilian nursing with a new ethics, that is, a way of thinking that preserves the basic principles of nursing and adapts to the modern world, for example, through the inclusion of social media, to guide the conduct of nursing professionals, in this context, needs to be expanded. A modern approach to nursing ethics requires professional doing based on the professional values and priorities of the assisted person. Quantitative and qualitative studies corroborate the need for discussion about ethical issues in nursing professional practice, through expanded reflections on theoretical concepts and principles<sup>(11-13)</sup>. Everyday questions, such as education, interpersonal and work relationships, permeate the question about nursing, if it really has a theoretical domain of ethics and what are its specificities.

Thus, in order to modify the existing paradigms about professional practice, the search for innovative and expanded references is needed to address complex and emerging contemporary issues, such as nursing ethics. To this end, help can be sought in other disciplines, such as political science and philosophy, in order to broaden knowledge in nursing and health science. It is believed that some of Hannah Arendt's philosophical and political principles can contribute to look at the ethical problems of nursing with the help of a contemporary and innovative theoretical-philosophical framework, in order to enable new resolutions to old problems of professional practice. It is an essential challenge to rethink this action in the light of Hannah Arendt's thinking, especially with regard to the concepts of the human condition and the banality of evil, so that new strategies for professional ethical challenges can be sought.

This study aims to reflect on the ethics of professional nursing, taking into consideration

the concepts of human condition and banality of Hannah Arendt's evil.

## Method

A theoretical and philosophical reflection, based on the concepts of banality of evil and human condition of Hannah Arendt. This reflection study emerged from the discussions held in the optional discipline of the Doctorate and Master of Nursing Courses entitled "Philosophy of Nursing Science and Health" of the Graduate Program in Nursing of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (*Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina*, UFSC). To conclude the course, it was proposed to conduct a theoretical and philosophical reflection, in the form of a manuscript, about one of the topics addressed in the discipline, bringing it closer to nursing. Hannah Arendt's reflections emerged as essential to the human condition and the emerging ethical issues in nursing practice and they were a theoretical choice. In-depth readings of the theoretical framework were performed and access to the materials occurred by indication of *expertises* in the field and by searching *online* databases. Thus, the importance of reflecting on Hannah Arendt's concepts of human condition and evil's banality emerged, in order to broaden and deepen the discussions about nursing practice. The human condition is meant to reflect on what we are doing and calls us to re-consider the human condition based on our most recent experiences and fears.

## Results and discussion

In this study, two categories emerged: Hannah Arendt, the human condition and the banality of evil; and Reflections on ethics in nursing practice through concepts of the thinker Hannah Arendt. In the category, were presented and discussed the concepts of human condition and banality of evil, which supported this study. In the second category, the practical application of these two concepts to professional practice was discussed.

*Hannah Arendt, the human condition and the banality of evil*

The German Hannah Arendt, a philosopher and contemporary political thinker, born in 1906, was of Jewish descent. During World War II, she went to the United States of America, where she was a University Professor and author of several books<sup>(11-13)</sup>. For theoretical and philosophical discussions about ethics in nursing practice, the reflections will be based on the concepts of human condition and banality of evil.

Hannah Arendt makes profound reflections on the human condition associated with the working society in which human beings are inserted. For the author, the human condition is the life forms that the human being imposes on himself to live and survive, being different from human nature. The expression of the thinker *vita activa*, includes three essential human activities: the labor (biological process of the human body); the work (activity that corresponds to the artificiality of human existence, expressed by the production of an artificial world of things different from that given by the natural environment); and the action (the only activity among human beings without mediation of things or matters, all human and different – social, which is the condition of all political life)<sup>(11)</sup>. Such activities are essential, for each of them corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life was given to human beings on earth.

The centrality of life at work causes the elements that constitute it to be constructed, deconstructed and rethought based on it. Regarding the revelation of the agent in discourse and action, it is clear that human plurality is necessary for the composition of action and discourse, with a double meaning in the aspect of equality and difference. In this context, human beings need speech and action to make themselves understood<sup>(13)</sup>.

Human action is a process that is closely linked to the fact that people live together. To take action, Hannah defends the intrinsic need of a society, that is, the relationship of one

human being with another human being. Thus man is a social and political animal. This way of thinking has been associated with issues already discussed since Aristotle in ancient Greece, when he described man as an *animal socialis*<sup>(11)</sup>.

This thinker also discusses important issues for ethics, widely used in the disciplines of law and education, such as the need to maintain a cohesive society through the sense of belonging. By using word, deed and freedom, Arendt portrays that a hope of democracy is possible<sup>(12)</sup>.

Another correlation with ethical and moral issues is associated with the German thinker's reflections on the banality of evil that arise during the coverage of the trial of the Jewish Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, who was on trial for managing the mass deportation logistics of the Jews during the Holocaust. In the book "Eichmann in Jerusalem"<sup>(13)</sup>, Hannah observes the non-reflection of the man being judged, who followed orders and did not reason about his attitudes/actions. From this observation, it identifies the implications of the relationship between the lack of thought and the banality of evil, that is, in the absence of thought in actions, evil becomes commonplace. When a human being refuses to think about the attitudes/actions he is performing – he assumes himself to be mediocre – they are refusing their essence of being a person, leading to the massification of society. Regarding the phenomenon of the banality of evil, the author argues that people considered to have normal behaviors – such as Eichmann – can take monstrous attitudes in specific contexts, for the absence of reflection<sup>(13)</sup>. Hannah Arendt's concern is to demonstrate how inability to think is related to the privileged environment for moral failure. As nursing is a profession dedicated to integral care for human beings, in which its practice is a comprehensive, interactive and associative phenomenon, the dimensions of care reveal the complexity of professional issues<sup>(14-15)</sup>. In the daily reality faced by nursing professionals, in their various ethical dilemmas, when under unfavorable working conditions, such as lack of materials, number

of beds below demand, inadequate staffing, and ethical concern should be generated in this practice. Therefore, professionals tend to become reproductive machines that perform activities without reflecting on the attitudes and conditions impose<sup>(16-17)</sup>.

In this case, evil can be viewed from an ethical and political perspective. The phenomenon of the banality of evil is associated with dissociation between knowledge and thought, where the human being becomes a machine that reproduces activities and without reasoning, in which superficiality and mechanism are imperative. In the discourse that makes man a political being, to follow rules without critical reflection would make the speech unimportant<sup>(16)</sup>.

*Reflections on ethics in nursing practice through concepts of the thinker Hannah Arendt*

The depth of the ethical issues found in nursing professional practice transcends the care itself. It is also related to the activities carried out by the professional team and the way the team leader, in this case, the nurse, will organize power relations between team members<sup>(13-17)</sup>. For example, in matters associated with patient safety, errors or adverse events are not recorded or reported for fear of reprisals. However, the following reflection is necessary: Who has never made a mistake or felt insecure in performing a procedure? Should I judge and not try to understand each other? This can create a feeling of "dark times" within health care facilities, as people have no confidence or habit of discussing, talking and reflecting on their actions.

In this process, Hannah Arendt reveals the importance of understanding situations, taking into account their multidimensional context, to try to avoid future problems. As in the case of Eichmann, in which she points out that understanding is necessary, even if it is not an acceptance of attitude, to try to prevent equal situations from happening in the future. Considering that the nursing profession deals with human beings and that professional errors

can bring permanent damage and cost a life, it is necessary to reflect on the multiple factors involved in the process of making mistakes. These include poor working conditions, lack of materials, lack of professionals, non-institutional support, non-manager support, lack of protocols, among others<sup>(18)</sup>. These factors show that often the culpability interpreted by negligence, malpractice or recklessness cannot be attributed to just one individual, in this case the nursing professional, but consider all the facts that involve the care process. It is noteworthy that we are not exempting the professional from individual responsibility, but trying to understand the complexity of the dynamics of professional practice that can lead to a situation of injury<sup>(16,19)</sup>.

In health work, it is considered that professional decisions always imply interventions on other human beings and their quality of life, which are often in a fragile/vulnerable situation<sup>(7-8)</sup>. In this sense, care is also problematized in its ethical content, being essential a frequent reflection on professional and social responsibility, since nursing is an activity correlated with the essence of survival of the human being.

However, the daily practice is linked to professional ethics, when, in care, nursing professionals are faced with situations in which they need to establish priorities for care. The daily ethical dilemmas, the precarious conditions to which they are exposed, lead to think and reflect on professional actions, which should be based on the code of professional ethics<sup>(20-22)</sup>, which, by guiding and directing the actions of nursing professionals, should go through the entire training period<sup>(14)</sup>.

Currently, issues associated with professional ethics in social networks are proving to be important and need further study of ethical and collective responsibility in social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp<sup>(23-24)</sup>. An Integrative review<sup>(23)</sup> revealed that nursing professionals use these tools to research, teach and assist. However, professionals need to reflect on the impact of social media on the professional context. Therefore, further studies



on the subject are needed to prevent the internet from becoming another context of forgetting the human condition of the health professional and the human condition of patients in these scenarios. It is believed to be important broad reflections on the subject, to allow the broader thinking of the person/professional performance in the social networks.

Given this, it is important to recognize that the workers' society is complex within the human condition of professional nursing. It is necessary to understand that work is an essence of the human being, in which his exhaustion and the feeling of not belonging to the profession can lead to a reduction of his thinking process. It is noticed that, in nursing, the professional cannot renounce being a person, with his feelings and his critical sense. This is important to prevent the nursing professional from remaining in repetitions, to fit into the system. By valuing the individual's thinking process, it will be possible for a professional with critical-reflective thinking in the different contexts in which they are inserted. Assuming a critical-reflexive and ethical non-judgmental stance proves to be a relevant professional stance to alter professional blaming behavior. Therefore, strategies can be found to understand each other, think differently, and thus avoid mistakes and anticipate future dilemmas.

This thinking process can prevent mechanization and fragmentation of care, which can lead to lack of humanization, increase the risk of errors and decrease the quality of health care in general. The banality of evil in nursing is linked to the process of mechanization of work, in which critical thinking is necessary, especially in situations of error, as these can occur in the making of all human beings. These, for some failure in the process of critical reflection, for various reasons, including the renunciation of thinking, may be unable to give meaning to events and their acts<sup>(16-18)</sup>. Hannah Arendt<sup>(11)</sup> argues that the absence of thought – *thoughtlessness* – is a reckless carelessness that makes thinking and doing empty. To get out of this condition, she proposes to think about the practice, to think about what we are doing.

One of the strategies proposed to work the banality of evil in nursing is permanent and continuing education in health, using active and innovative methodologies, in which the professional, through critical thinking, puts himself in the situation of wanting to learn, and the health institutions, in the situation of wanting to teach. This process should be circular and interactive, so that the exchange of knowledge and opinions occurs, enabling an effective and strengthening education of critical-reflexive knowledge in nursing/health<sup>(18)</sup>. The break with the daily routine, through the exercise of reflection, dialog, action and thinking, gives meaning to autonomy and critical educational thinking<sup>(14,17,20)</sup>. The thinking process emerges as the process of collectivity and professional belonging, in which thinking must be evidenced as a human practice of shared decision, not as an individual performance<sup>(15)</sup>.

Hannah Arendt addresses the human condition and its temporality based on the political practice of the human being in the triad of performances: Supplying the human biological needs (*homo laborans*), the form to transform nature into durable objects shared by humans (*homo faber*), and action linked in the form of the relationship between men and their political condition<sup>(11)</sup>.

The human condition<sup>(11)</sup>, thinking was inspired by personal experience. The interests concerned human political phenomena and ontological and metaphysical questions about nature and the universe. The human condition represents situations related to man's existence and belonging in a certain place. Thinking about nursing, the need to feel belonging to a profession is essential for its consolidation and for strengthening the relationship of the people involved in it.

Feeling belonging to Nursing, towards a cohesion, strengthening cooperation and interpersonal relationship, will lead professionals to discursive-political-social actions in favor of nursing/health, reducing ethical-professional conflicts and building a solidarity in Nursing<sup>(14,19,20)</sup>. Teamwork should also be strengthened through

horizontal and integrated actions, gathering knowledge among the subjects and valuing the uniqueness of the professionals involved in the Nursing work process<sup>(19)</sup>. These attitudes of belonging will positively reflect on professional visibility and, consequently, on the work performed. When the nursing professional perceives himself as an essential part of the nursing team, he recognizes the value and importance of this collective professional practice and the collective dimension that gives care in society. Wanting to belong and feel belonging to the nursing professional class can generate a perception of collective responsibility. This may reflect the acceptance of the human condition of health professionals.

### Conclusion

The reflection on ethics in the professional practice of nursing, taking into account the concepts of human condition and the banality of Hannah Arendt, reinforces the importance of nursing professionals in assuming a critical-reflexive posture and non-judgmental ethics. Nursing professionals should be able to articulate complex problems within their contexts and seek to understand actions rather than blame individuals. In these reflections of professional practice, individual responsibility within the ethics of nursing practice is not exempt, but a new look is proposed in the light of an understanding of human actions (in which it is understood that the nursing professional has a human condition).

The critical-reflexive posture must permeate the process of caring since the formation, as inherent in doing/being a nursing professional. This dimension should not be considered less important than other actions developed by Nursing. It is believed that Hannah Arendt's concepts are essential for nursing ethics, as they favor the attempt to find new solutions to the challenges in the professional field, through an ethics that understands the complexity of the human condition (labor, work) and perpetrate the banality of evil. It is worth noting that

continuing and continuing education in health, teamwork and feeling of belonging to the nursing profession are seen as strategies for growth and professional visibility, assuming that the inability to think can be related to the privileged environment for the moral failure.

Through ethical reflection, the professional human being can become a thinking nurse-person who is able to act ethically within his or her human condition. Therefore, ethical thinking will be encouraged, together with teammates, within the working conditions experienced, preserving empathy to deal with their patients. Thus, it is avoided that the mechanization of care and the occurrence of unethical events become commonplace in the routine of nursing care focused on finding culprits, rather than assuming joint solutions.

### Collaborations:

1 – conception, design, analysis and interpretation of data: Camila Biazus Dalcin, Rafaela Serpa, Evangelia Kotzias Atherino dos Santos, Francis Solange Vieira Tourinhon and Patrícia Kuerten Rocha;

2 – writing of the article and relevant critical review of the intellectual content: Camila Biazus Dalcin, Rafaela Serpa, Evangelia Kotzias Atherino dos Santos, Francis Solange Vieira Tourinhon and Patrícia Kuerten Rocha;

3 – final approval of the version to be published: Camila Biazus Dalcin, Rafaela Serpa, Evangelia Kotzias Atherino dos Santos, Francis Solange Vieira Tourinhon and Patrícia Kuerten Rocha.

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