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REVIEW

Bridging Culture and Care: The Role of Ethnographic Inquiry in Contemporary Nursing Practice

Conectando Cultura y Cuidado: El Papel de la Investigación Etnográfica en la Práctica de Enfermería Contemporánea

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: ethnography has gained increasing relevance in nursing research by enabling the understanding of cultural meanings attributed to health, illness, and care. This study aims to analyze the application of ethnography in the nursing discipline, with a particular focus on ethnonursing as a theoretical and practical field that supports culturally congruent care.

Method: a literature analysis was conducted, focusing on studies and theoretical contributions that explore the integration of ethnographic approaches in nursing. Emphasis was placed on the epistemological foundations of ethnography, participant observation techniques, interviews, and documentary research, as well as on the identification of ethical and methodological challenges.

Results: the findings reveal that ethnonursing provides a robust framework for understanding cultural contexts in healthcare. The literature highlights its relevance in promoting care practices that respect cultural diversity and improve the nurse-patient relationship. Key methodological tools such as participant observation and cultural interviews are central to its implementation. However, challenges such as researcher positioning, ethical dilemmas, and the complexity of cultural interpretation remain.

Conclusions: integrating ethnonursing into clinical practice enhances the delivery of interculturally competent care that upholds human dignity. In a global context marked by increasing cultural diversity and migratory flows, ethnographic approaches contribute significantly to tailoring care to patients' cultural needs, reinforcing the central role of nursing in promoting equitable and respectful healthcare.

Keywords: Anthropolgy, Cultural; Etnography; Qualitative Research; Nursing.

RESUMEN

Introducción: la etnografía ha adquirido una relevancia creciente en la investigación en enfermería al permitir la comprensión de los significados culturales atribuidos a la salud, la enfermedad y el cuidado. Este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar la aplicación de la etnografía en la disciplina de enfermería, con un enfoque particular en la etnoenfermería como campo teórico y práctico que promueve un cuidado culturalmente congruente.

Método: se realizó un análisis de la literatura, centrado en estudios y aportes teóricos que exploran la integración de enfoques etnográficos en la enfermería. Se hizo hincapié en los fundamentos epistemológicos de la etnografía, las técnicas de observación participante, las entrevistas y la investigación documental, así como en la identificación de desafíos éticos y metodológicos.

Resultados: los hallazgos revelan que la etnoenfermería proporciona un marco sólido para comprender los contextos culturales en la atención sanitaria. La literatura destaca su relevancia en la promoción de prácticas de cuidado que respeten la diversidad cultural y mejoren la relación enfermera-persona. Herramientas metodológicas clave como la observación participante y las entrevistas culturales son centrales en su implementación. Sin embargo, persisten desafíos como la posición del investigador, los dilemas éticos y la complejidad de la interpretación cultural.

Conclusiones: la integración de la etnoenfermería en la práctica clínica mejora la prestación de cuidados interculturalmente competentes que respetan la dignidad humana. En un contexto global marcado por una creciente diversidad cultural y flujos migratorios, los enfoques etnográficos contribuyen significativamente a adaptar los cuidados a las necesidades culturales de las personas, reforzando el papel central de la enfermería en la promoción de una atención equitativa y respetuosa.

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Palabras clave: Antropología Cultural; Etnografía; Investigación Cualitativa; Enfermería.

INTRODUCTION

Since its conception, the human being has been recognized as a unique individual, bearer of singular experiences, beliefs, values, and perspectives. By integrating into society, the person is shaped by the habits and customs of the sociocultural context in which they are inserted, thus acquiring a distinct cultural identity.[1,2] In this sense, culture becomes a structuring element in the understanding of the health–illness process and care practices.

In this context, ethnography is a qualitative research method grounded in phenomenology and cultural anthropology aimed to interpret specific cultural universes, enabling the description and understanding of social practices, beliefs, and behaviors of human groups, based on prolonged participant observation, interviews, and document analysis.[3,4]

When focusing on the nurse's intervention, it is evident that this is directed toward individuals and their families, who are deeply shaped and influenced by their cultural contexts.

The recognition of cultural diversity thus becomes imperative for nurses. Understanding the cultural complexity of the people under care allows for planning individualized and person-centered interventions, tailored to their needs and expectations, thereby promoting a more humanized, effective, and ethical healthcare practice.

This theme becomes increasingly relevant in the face of the current global scenario, marked by a significant increase in migratory flows, resulting in an increasingly diverse and multicultural society. According to the International Organization for Migration, over 281 million people, representing 3,6 % of the global population, were living outside their country of origin, a figure thar has grown significantly over the past two decades due to economic disparities, armed conflict, environmental crises, and the search for better living conditions.[5] This unprecedent global mobility has transformed societies into culturally diverse and dynamic environments, where multiples languages, traditions, and health beliefs coexist and interact.

In Europe, specifically in Portugal, more than 1044606 legally resident foreign citizens resided in the country by the end of 2023, a number that continues to rise steadily.[6] These individuals come from diverse regions, bringing with them distinct cultural understandings of health, illness, and care practices.

This demographic transformation poses significant challenges to healthcare systems, particularly in ensuring culturally competent and sensitive responses. As international migration continues to intensify in the coming decades, nurses are increasingly called upon to care for culturally heterogeneous populations. This requires the ability to deliver care that is not only clinically effective, but also culturally responsive, respectful, and grounded in the values and beliefs of the individuals and communities they serve.

Within this perspective, ethnonursing — proposed by Madeleine Leininger — stands out as a field that introduces the need to respect and integrate cultural diversity into nursing practice.[7,8,9] A culturally based approach to care values the uniqueness of the individual being cared for, their symbolic practices, and values, promoting culturally competent interventions.

In this context, ethnography can be an indispensable methodological approach in nursing. It allows for the in-depth exploration of the cultural dimensions of care, supports the development of person-centered interventions, and contributes to reducing inequalities and improving health outcomes in multicultural settings. Ethnonursing, in particular, reinforces the ethical commitment to dignity, equity, and respect for cultural difference, positioning itself as a transformative tool in nursing practice and education.

Given this context, the present study aims to analyze the application of ethnography in the field of nursing, with particular emphasis on ethnonursing, as a theoretical-practical perspective that supports culturally competent and person-centered care.

METHOD

Declare type of investigation, explain the research method, selection criteria, timeline, number of articles used, language, keywords. How was the processing process?

This study is a bibliographic review with qualitative and narrative approach, aiming to analyze the application of ethnography in contemporary nursing, with emphasis on the theoretical-practical contributions of ethnonursing. The literature search was conducted in April 2025 in the following databases: Pubmed, CINAHL, SciELO, and Scopus.

Inclusion criteria comprised: (i) scientific articles and reviews focused on ethnographic methods in nursing and/or ethnonursing; (ii) written in English, Portuguese, or Spanish; and (iii) available in full-text format. Exclusion criteria included: (i) opinion articles, editorials, or commentaries; (ii) articles without clear methodological description; and (iii) publications unrelated to nursing or cultural care. Studies were included without time restriction.

Keywords used in Boolean combinations included: "Ethnography," "Cultural Anthropology," "Ethnonursing," "Qualitative Research," and "Nursing." After applying the inclusion criteria, eighteen relevant articles were selected for full reading and critical analysis.

The data were organized thematically and analyzed by content analysis technique, highlighting the main theoretical foundations, methodologies, applications, and challenges related to ethnography and ethnonursing in nursing practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethnography dates back to the contributions of Franz Boas, Malinowski, and Margaret Mead, and has evolved as a method for in-depth analysis of cultural dynamics. Pamplona & Parada highlight that the goal of ethnography is to identify the cultural knowledge people use to structure their behaviors and assign meaning to their experiences.[9] It is a methodology that privileges thick

description, fostering an understanding of the experiences and symbolic constructions of the groups being studied.[10]

In nursing, the application of ethnography has enabled the study of cultural practices related to birth, aging, death, therapeutic adherence, spirituality, care rituals, among others.[1,11] Rosa et al. underline the importance of participant observation and personal narratives as fundamental tools for grasping the meanings of actions and relationships in healthcare contexts.[2] In turn, Sousa & Barroso identify two interpretative models in ethnographic studies: the naturalistic-ecological approach and the qualitative-phenomenological approach.[12] The former understands human behavior as influenced by the sociocultural environment; the latter emphasizes the subjective and intentional interpretations of social actors.

Ethnonursing has asserted itself as a robust theoretical and methodological approach in nursing research, enabling an understanding of the cultural meanings of care from the perspective of those directly involved in healthcare contexts.[1,8] Through ethnography, nursing professionals can explore the complexity of cultural practices, beliefs, and values that shape behavior and decision-making in health.[1,8]

Within this scope, the contribution of Madeleine Leininger stands out. Through the Transcultural Nursing Theory, she introduced the emic and etic perspectives as essential tools for analyzing cultural practices.[7-8] The emic perspective reflects the insider's view, while the etic perspective represents the theoretical analysis of the researcher. The interplay between these perspectives enables the construction of culturally coherent care. Leininger proposed three strategies to operationalize culturally competent care: (i) cultural care preservation/maintenance, (ii) cultural care accommodation/negotiation, and (iii) cultural care repatterning/restructuring.[7,8,13] These strategies aim to promote health and well-being through meaningful practices that respect individuals' beliefs and values.[13]

At a theoretical level, Belém and colleagues discuss the contributions of ethnonursing as a culture-sensitive research approach grounded in Leininger's theory of transcultural care.[14] The authors highlight the importance of articulating scientific knowledge with traditional understanding, defending ethnonursing as an essential analytical tool for comprehending the cultural determinants of healthcare practices.[14]

Additionally, Briñez Ariza et al. delve into the methodological, theoretical, and practical aspects of ethnonursing, emphasizing the role of emic (participant view) and etic (researcher view) perspectives in the construction of meaningful knowledge.[15] Ethnonursing is presented as a path to access deep narratives about care experiences, promoting a more reflective and humanized practice.

Shattnawi, in turn, systematize the methodological steps of ethnonursing and reinforce its applicability in studying the meanings of care.[16] The authors demonstrate that this approach enables the integration of individuals' symbolic, affective, and ritual contexts into the planning of nursing care, valuing human dignity and cultural congruence.[16]

Ethnographic research includes techniques such as participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. Various authors, such as Rosa et al. and Ataídes et al., describe the main stages of the ethnographic process: field entry, observation, immersion, analysis, and reflection.[2,17] Participant observation allows the capture of gestures, attitudes, and social interactions in real time. The use of field notes, according to Spradley,[18] is essential for recording data in a detailed and analytical manner. Ethnographic interviewing, in its various forms (structured, semi-structured, informal, and in-depth), enables access to individual and collective narratives on experiences of care, health, and illness.[4] The combination of observation and interviews allows triangulation, increasing data validity.[12] Document analysis, as emphasized by Ataídes et al., complements field data and enables the examination of symbolic and historical records of the group being studied.[17]

The study by Hwang et al. represents a concrete application of ethnography in the hospital context, as it explores the culture of nursing research in a tertiary Korean hospital.[19] Through participant observation and interviews with nurses, the authors identified tensions between clinical work and research activities, emphasizing the importance of organizational support and institutional valuing of research to promote professional development and quality care.[19]

Although these methodologies provide significant contributions to understanding cultural phenomena, it is important to recognize that ethnographic studies also present advantages and limitations. Among the advantages are descriptive richness, field immersion, and the possibility of understanding deep meanings. However, challenges include the extended time required for research, the risk of interpretive bias, the ethical complexity of researcher–participant relationships, and linguistic and cultural barriers.[3,4,17]

Ethnocentrism is a critical limitation. Lenardt et al. warn that the imposition of the professional's cultural values may compromise therapeutic adherence, generate discomfort, and reduce the effectiveness of care.[3] Therefore, the development of cultural competence and self-reflection are essential.

In this scenario, ethnonursing emerges as a fundamental methodological and theoretical instrument for professionals working in culturally diverse contexts. Its application in clinical practice promotes sensitive, individualized care that respects cultural beliefs. Moreover, it fosters the humanization of care by incorporating individuals' subjectivities and symbolic practices.[10] However, its effective implementation depends on the training of nurses in cultural competencies, the institutionalization of diversity-based practices, and the overcoming of strict biomedical paradigms that neglect the role of culture in health.[1,20]

Convergently, the reviewed studies point to the need to strengthen nurses' training in cultural competencies, foster organizational environments supportive of qualitative research, and consolidate culturally competent care practices. Ethnonursing thus emerges as a critical tool for developing more ethical, person-centered care practices aligned with the growing cultural diversity of contemporary healthcare contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

Ethnography and ethnonursing offer nursing robust epistemological frameworks to understand care as a culturally situated and meaning-driven practice. By embracing the cultural dimensions of health, illness, and care, these approaches promote ethically sound, person-centered, and contextually appropriate interventions.In increasingly multicultural societies, recognizing cultural

diversity and integrating transcultural strategies into nursing education and practice is imperative. These competencies enhance the ability of nurses to respond to the unique cultural needs and expectations of individuals and communities, thereby improving the relevance and quality of care. Investing in ethnographic research not only expands nursing knowledge but also reinforces its ethical commitment to human dignity, cultural respect, and social transformation. Ethnonursing ultimately affirms difference as a central dimension of compassionate care and strengthens nursing's identity as a relational, humanistic, and culturally responsive discipline.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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