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Fabric and thread: a document for the history of nursing

Tecido e linha: documento para a história da enfermagem

Tejido e hilo: un documento para la historia de la enfermería

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ABSTRACT

The text presents the use of embroidered fabrics as a methodology for nursing education beginning in the 1940s. Fifteen pieces are presented that allow for the narration of the history of care. The use of needle and thread is compared to the use of pen and ink in writing a historical narrative. Embroidery was widely used for women's communication. The construction of historical writing does not need to be limited to written documents. Therefore, fabrics and threads are also means of understanding the culture of care, with an emphasis on nursing education.

Descriptors: Nursing; History of Nursing; Education, Nursing; Nursing Care.

RESUMO

O texto apresenta o uso de tecidos bordados como metodologia para o ensino de enfermagem a partir da década de 1940, aproximadamente. São 15 peças que possibilitam narrar a história do cuidado. O uso de agulha e linha é comparado à pena e à tinta na escrita da narrativa histórica. O bordado foi amplamente utilizado para a comunicação feminina. A construção da escrita histórica não precisa estar limitada aos documentos escritos. Logo, os tecidos e linhas, também, são meios de compreender a cultura dos cuidados com ênfase no ensino de enfermagem.

Descritores: Enfermagem; História da Enfermagem; Educação em Enfermagem; Cuidados de Enfermagem.

RESUMEN

El texto presenta el uso de telas bordadas como metodología para la formación en enfermería desde aproximadamente la década de 1940. Se presentan quince piezas que permiten narrar la historia del cuidado. Se compara el uso de aguja e hilo con el de pluma y tinta en la escritura de la narrativa histórica. El bordado se usaba ampliamente para la comunicación femenina. La construcción de la escritura histórica no tiene por qué limitarse a los documentos escritos. Por lo tanto, las telas y los hilos también son medios para comprender la cultura del cuidado, con énfasis en la formación en enfermería.

Descriptor: Enfermería; Historia de la Enfermería; Educación en Enfermería; Atención de Enfermería.

INTRODUCTION

The object/document we are presenting has writing in cotton thread on a fabric support. It is a material that was used to teach caregiving. Based on the evidence, it dates to between the 1940s and 1980s. The collection of embroidered fabrics is held in the custody of the *Arquivo Setorial Enfermeira Maria de Castro Pamphiro, Escola de Enfermagem Alfredo Pinto, Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO)*.

The collection comprises 15 artifacts mounted on fabric supports of various dimensions and characteristics. The color palette consists of shades of blue, beige, and white, and the pieces are embroidered with words or phrases intended for educational use. Despite showing some wear from age, the material is in good condition, with well-preserved stitching and embroidery.

Therefore, our objective was to present, in document format, using fabric and thread, writing in colored lines as a mental trigger strategy for constructing a historical narrative.

(i) Collection of fabrics for teaching

We will present some pieces from the collection as historical documents. To illustrate, we will display a partial image of the set to showcase the variety of embroidered fabrics used for nursing education.

The items, arranged on a fabric support in quantities and with writing in lines in different color tones, are: EEAP abdominal binder; EEAP ice pack; EEAP hot pack cover; EEAP Gastrointestinal Tube Insertion (GT INS); EEAP Orogastric Tube (OT); EEAP DR (Delivery Room) – apron; EEAP I (Ice); and EEAP T (Tray). EEAP stands for *Escola de Enfermagem Alfredo Pinto* (Figure 1).

It should be noted that the acronyms were decoded by professors from the institution's Department of Fundamental Nursing at the time the documents in question were being taught.

The image is composed of ten pieces. Although we can identify a color palette of grays, the fabrics are shades of white, blue, and beige with multicolored lines of text. The artifacts stand out with the initials of the educational institution, EEAP.



Figure 1 - Collection of embroidered fabric designs for nursing education

Source: Marina Medeiros Ribeiro (2015).

(ii) Historical document

Using needle and thread to bring a collection of written objects/documents onto a fabric support to teach nursing care reminds us of Roger Chartier's⁽¹⁾ work on historical documents on supports other than paper.

In his work, "Inscription and Erasure: Literature and Written Culture from the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Century", Chartier⁽¹⁾ presents several texts dating from the 11th to the 18th century. In these texts, the author reports that numerous sources represent the practices of writing, known as written culture. This culture aims to understand human societies by revealing languages that cannot be separated from the analysis and symbolic meanings transmitted by artifacts.

To that end, Chartier presents us with documents on various media, such as stone, papyrus, wood, wax, fabric, and paper. These documents bear traces of the past, referring to human beings' memories, struggles, and achievements. Furthermore, he notes that some documents are found on materials that allow for writing and erasing, such as wax tablets. Thus, written culture is considered a documentary source⁽¹⁾.

Among the documentary supports, we highlight writing on fabric. Chartier reports that the language of needle and thread, as opposed to pen and ink, for instance, are marks of a time. He recalls that 17th-century English women wrote and embroidered based on samplers, which are matrices with models of letters, numbers, and short texts in uppercase and lowercase⁽¹⁾.

When applied to embroidered writing, love handkerchiefs and gifts from lovers offer insight into its development. These curious pieces help us understand the various ways the word was used and disseminated. Love handkerchiefs are letters woven into cloth. They preserve remnants of the written form as well as traces relating to habits, social practices, and culture, such as when a young woman gave a gift to her beloved. In other words, it is a confirmation of their "commitment", and the same applies to the reverse. Examples include when grooms/lovers gifted their fiancées with a sewing machine or when bedspreads were woven collectively and marked with decorative motifs, or when they were part of marital customs and rituals, or when they inscribed monograms on bed linens and towels – a symbolic record of their marital union⁽²⁾.

The needle and thread are the embroiderer, understanding that the pen acts as the scribe. The fabric corresponds to an intimate notebook or a page for personal writing. It is a form of expression through gestures and words of affection. This is well-known in the early school years of girls, when they learn to sign their names and learn the alphabet. Notably, since the 17th century, this initiation has taken place through

“needlework”, which is believed to have favored the development of reading and writing as such “marks” were produced on household items. Thus, by embroidering square fabrics with peculiar inscriptions, women connected their traditions⁽²⁾.

This signifies the affirmation of female identity and recognition of pieces intended for domestic use. Considering the connection between women’s identity and embroidery brings to mind traditional societies, such as a village in northern Burgundy, France. In the work “*Façons de dire, façons de faire. La laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière*”, women recorded rites of passage with needle and thread in the weave of fabric alongside their texts through their ways of speaking and doing⁽³⁾.

Bringing written culture to fabrics evokes Michelle Perrot’s works⁽⁴⁾, such as “My Stories of Women” and “Women or the Silences of History”⁽⁵⁾. In these works, Perrot recounts the various ways women used pseudonyms and other strategies to write and disseminate texts in society and in intimate diaries. In this way, they recorded their thoughts, feelings, reflections, and positions in symbolic silence. This record, linked to the embroidery practices used in nursing education, allows us to discover traces of a traditional practice within a predominantly female universe.

Based on the above, when we refer to text on fabric, it signifies an understanding that it is one of the ways women entered the field of written culture⁽¹⁾. This concept is linked to embroidered fabrics used in nursing education.

According to the time, place, and conditions of enunciation linked to feminine practices⁽²⁾, embroidery, needle, thread, and fabrics were used as one of the forms of communication and as a product and producer of meanings. With inscriptions in colored letters, they reaffirm the idea that the feminine originates in the domestic sphere and extends to the professional and educational fields through written culture.

The culture of writing with a needle and thread on fabric, which is used to teach care in nursing education, can be linked to the culture of care. This applies to mechanisms of information transmission and communication, as well as ways of acting⁽⁶⁾.

Furthermore, cultural circularity can be articulated. This concept, present in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Carlo Ginzburg, is symbiotic in that it occurs in a dialogical and circular manner—mutual and reciprocal⁽⁷⁾.

Combining these two concepts emphasizes the potential of using embroidered fabrics in nursing education. These marks are symbols of the feminine universe in a predominantly female profession. They are vestiges that can reveal historical aspects that have perhaps not been considered sources before. Initially, they can be unveiled through the historical method, microhistory, women’s history, and cultural history, thereby contributing to nursing’s historiography⁽⁸⁾.

(iii) Contribution to the history of nursing, health, and education

The needle-embroidered fabrics with colored threads in the collection refer to the book “*Manual de Enfermagem*”, authored by Elvira de Felice Souza⁽⁹⁾. The book provides readers with images of how to organize materials to be sterilized and how nurses fold fabrics for dressing packs and various trays (Figure 2).

Elvira de Felice Souza’s work⁽⁹⁾ is a Brazilian classic with more than six editions and reprints. It was first published in 1957. In times past, the manual was used to teach aspiring nurses the technical procedures of the profession using contemporary literature. Therefore, it is a document that articulates the collection of tissues intended for sterilization and the tissues intended for the tray (EEAPT).

The tissues were intended to support the procedure. Afterwards, they should be arranged on a tray or in a basin, covered, and taken to the patient so that the technique can be performed.

The abdominal binder has a long history, especially for women in the postpartum period. As demonstrated in Adolpho Possollo’s work of the 1920s, the document under discussion is described as a strategy for applying the bandaging technique⁽¹⁰⁾.

Indications for applying hot or cold compresses or packs were given. The bag and blanket are used to protect the skin from potential damage caused by the temperature of the water in its various physical states^(9,10).

The last document deals with the apron. Although the acronym “DR” stands for “delivery room”, it can be attributed to other meanings. Traditionally used in uniforms of bygone eras, the apron was a symbolic element in the development of nursing identity. Nurses wore it to protect themselves while providing care, as well as during household and field activities⁽⁴⁾.



Figure 2 – From folding to organizing the tray

Source: Elvira de Felice Souza's work^(9:208,451).

Ice packs and hot compresses are still used in healthcare practices today. They are indicated for the use of water in various physical states to alleviate pain from trauma and cramps, for instance, to provide comfort to patients.

These pieces from the teaching collection are remnants of a practice primarily carried out by women that document services beyond the scope of each document's intended purpose. They record the paths taken to construct a culture of care, which has undergone metamorphosis into what is provided today.

For instance, the idea that historical narratives can be constructed exclusively from paper-based documentation is a misconception. Hand-embroidered fabrics whose authorship could not be identified demonstrate the variety of documentary sources available to us and the traces, evidence, and clues they offer about nursing education in past times.

This leads us to consider how many students and teachers handled these documents in order to learn and teach nursing techniques. Many of these individuals are now professionals in the field, serving as nursing chiefs, directors, and presidents of institutions in various public and private sectors in Brazil and perhaps abroad.

As historical documents, fabrics have been used as teaching tools, serving as mental triggers for the initial steps in the teaching and learning process for students and teachers. The document itself evokes memories, recollections, and respect, as well as the forgetting of the sorrows experienced by those who handled it during their nursing training.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Given the above, the limitation lies in the lack of knowledge about how many people wrote the records found using needle and thread and who the authors were.

CONCLUSION

Presenting documents through fabrics and threads is one of the strategies used to trigger the construction of a historical narrative, which was achieved by bringing EEAP's *Arquivo Setorial Enfermeira Maria de Castro Pamphiro* collection to light.

Thus, when combined with fabric, needle and thread contribute to writing the history of nursing on a medium other than paper and pen. This history must be preserved and conserved for knowledge production aimed at building a culture of care.

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