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From nursing technicians to registered nurses: transition and challenges in professional practice: a historical study (2000–2021)

De técnicas de enfermagem a enfermeiras: transição e desafios
do exercício profissional: estudo histórico (2000–2021)

De las técnicas de enfermería a las enfermeras: transición y
desafíos de la práctica profesional: un estudio histórico (2000–2021)

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How to cite this article (Vancouver):

Silva LAS, Bellaguarda MLR, Padilha MICS, Canever BP, Forte EM. From nursing technicians to registered nurses: transition and challenges in professional practice: a historical study (2000-2021). Hist Enferm Rev Eletr. 2026;17(Esp):e002. <https://doi.org/10.51234/here.2025.v17.515>.

ABSTRACT

Objective: to describe the transition from nursing technician training to professionalization as registered nurses. **Method:** this was a qualitative, socio-historical, descriptive, and exploratory study. Thematic oral history was developed through interviews with 16 nurses who had previously trained as nursing technicians. Data analysis was performed using ATLAS.ti 9.0 software, based on Eliot Freidson's theoretical framework and following the stages of Thematic Content Analysis. **Results:** the results were categorized into three groups: Motivation for choosing nursing; Representations of the nursing technician; and Challenges of career transition. **Conclusion:** in the transition from nursing technician training to professionalization as registered nurses, personal and professional motivations for remaining in nursing are associated with professionalism, knowledge, and competencies established by credentialism, which presents challenges to autonomy and career progression. **Descriptors:** Nursing; Professional Training; Health Occupations; History of Nursing; Nursing Education.

RESUMO

Objetivo: descrever a transição de técnicas de enfermagem para a profissionalização como enfermeiras. **Método:** pesquisa de abordagem qualitativa, na perspectiva sócio-histórica, descritiva e exploratória. Foi desenvolvida a História Oral Temática, por meio de entrevistas com 16 enfermeiras que possuem formação prévia como técnicas de enfermagem. A análise se deu utilizando o software ATLAS.ti 9.0, fundamentada na perspectiva teórica de Eliot Freidson, seguindo as etapas da Análise Temática de Conteúdo. **Resultados:** foram discriminados em três categorias: Motivação para buscar a enfermagem; Representação da técnica de enfermagem; Os desafios da transição de carreira. **Conclusão:** na transição de técnicas de enfermagem para a profissionalização como enfermeiras, as motivações pessoais e profissionais para permanecer na enfermagem estão associadas ao profissionalismo, ao conhecimento e às competências estabelecidas pelo credencialismo, o que traz desafios para a autonomia e progressão na vida profissional.

Descritores: Enfermagem; Capacitação Profissional; Ocupações em saúde; História da Enfermagem; Educação em Enfermagem.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: describir la transición de técnicas de enfermería hacia la profesionalización como enfermeras. **Método:** investigación cualitativa con enfoque sociohistórico, descriptivo y exploratorio. Se empleó la Historia Oral Temática mediante entrevistas a 16 enfermeras con formación previa como técnicas de enfermería. El análisis se realizó con el software ATLAS.ti 9.0, basado en la perspectiva teórica de Eliot Freidson y siguiendo las etapas del Análisis Temático de Contenido. **Resultados:** surgieron tres categorías: Motivaciones para elegir la enfermería; Representación de la técnica de enfermería; Desafíos de la transición profesional. **Conclusión:** en la transición de técnicas de enfermería a la profesionalización como enfermeras, las motivaciones personales y profesionales para permanecer en la enfermería se relacionan con el profesionalismo, el conocimiento y las competencias definidas por el credencialismo, lo que genera desafíos para la autonomía y la progresión en la vida profesional. **Descriptores:** Enfermería; Capacitación Profesional; Empleos en Salud; Historia de la Enfermería; Educación en Enfermería.

INTRODUCTION

Nursing constitutes the largest workforce within health services in Brazil, with approximately 2,803,087 professionals legally authorized to practice, divided into four categories: nursing assistants, nursing technicians, midwives, and registered nurses⁽¹⁾. Nursing technicians and assistants comprise the mid-level professional workforce and often pursue undergraduate nursing education as a means of achieving professional advancement⁽²⁾.

The study "*Perfil da Enfermagem no Brasil*" (Nursing Profile in Brazil)⁽³⁾ indicates that more than one-third of these mid-level professionals have completed or are currently attending undergraduate nursing programs⁽⁴⁾. This phenomenon is known as overqualification and is influenced by different factors, such as the need for university-level education, uncertainties in the labor market, the expansion of professional competencies, and the discontinuation of professional registration for nursing assistants. These factors suggest that a higher educational level is increasingly required to practice nursing, driven by the expansion of vacancies and easier access to higher education in recent years⁽⁵⁾.

The pursuit of higher education may also be considered a necessary pathway to obtaining better wages, especially in Brazil, where the salary floor for technical-level nursing professionals remains far below what would be considered a living wage^(6,7). The latest Higher Education Census conducted by the Ministry of Education shows that nursing is a highly sought-after undergraduate program⁽⁸⁾; however, the availability of more qualified job positions has not kept pace with this expanded access to higher education⁽⁹⁾. In this context, several issues related to the career transition of nursing professionals deserve attention, especially regarding the work performed by registered nurses following technical-level training.

Studies indicate that nursing technicians experience difficulties adapting to their new professional role as registered nurses, particularly during the first years in the profession, due to the existing paradigmatic differences between the two categories^(10,11).

Career choice is shaped by an individual's historical background. When choosing a specific profession, individuals are influenced by the experiences accumulated throughout their lives, by internal and external factors, by family influences, and by the labor market context in which they are inserted⁽¹²⁾. This includes the ability to deal with challenges and conflicts, as well as the ethical principles that guide their actions. Even in the face of adversity, these professionals persevered until completing their education⁽¹²⁾.

Therefore, exploring the underlying reasons for these students' resilience in pursuing this goal represents an intriguing challenge. By adapting the educational process to nursing technicians and to the demands of the health sector, it becomes possible to better understand the training process itself and to practice in a more independent, coherent, and committed manner^(13,14). In this sense, in the transition from nursing technician to registered nurse, beyond the challenges involved in achieving knowledge production and formal education, there is also the need to establish oneself as a professional capable of monitoring one's own work, with decision-making power and autonomy to determine who may perform professional activities⁽¹⁵⁾. Thus, this study sought to answer the following question: how is professional autonomy constituted through the transition from nursing technician to registered nurse?

OBJECTIVE

To describe the transition process from nursing technician to registered nurse, identifying changes in professional practice.

METHOD

This was a qualitative, socio-historical, descriptive, and exploratory study developed using the Thematic Oral History (TOH) method and grounded in Eliot Freidson's sociology of professions⁽¹⁵⁾. TOH enables reflection and understanding regarding an event or fact that may be related to, interfere with, or be influenced by the recollections of oral sources⁽¹⁶⁾. The oral sources of this study consisted of registered nurses who had previously trained as nursing technicians and who were working as registered nurses in hospital settings. Registered nurses with at least one year of experience in hospital care, previous technical-level training, and active registration with the Regional Nursing Council were included. Registered nurses who were on medical leave or vacation during the data collection period were excluded.

The oral sources were selected based on a historical timeframe beginning in the year 2000, defined due to Brazilian political investments in the fields of health and education, which introduced innovations in both technical and higher education training. The year 2021 was established as the final milestone because of the approval of Resolution 1, dated January 5, 2021, which instituted the new Brazilian National General Curriculum Guidelines for Professional and Technological Education. Access to the oral sources initially occurred through the researcher's contact with a member of her work team. Subsequently, the snowball technique⁽¹⁷⁾ was applied, in which a professional directly known to the researcher referred other professionals (name, telephone number, and e-mail address). The practice setting of the participants consisted of four public and private hospitals located in two cities in southern Brazil.

Data collection procedures began only after approval of the study by the Research Ethics Committee. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews carried out by the principal researcher, who was enrolled in *stricto sensu* graduate education, either remotely or in person, according to the participant's preference. The interviews addressed questions related to the representation of being a nursing technician in the educational field and as a member of the nursing team, recognition of being a registered nurse, social perceptions regarding the registered nurse, changes in the work process, meanings attributed to professional identity, insertion into the labor market, and professional relationships. Initially, the oral sources were contacted via e-mail, WhatsApp®, and telephone through a formal invitation. After agreement to participate, the Informed Consent Form and the interview assignment letter were sent for reading. The interviews took place between March and July 2023, with an average duration of 25 minutes. They were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and organized into a Microsoft Word® document.

The sample size was defined according to the data saturation criterion, which was observed when, during the 14th interview, the information began to show similarities. All collected material was entered into ATLAS.ti version 9.0 software, under license L-2D5-EDB, and was subsequently coded and organized. The codes and categories emerging from the software — such as knowledge, financial issues, and enjoyment of working in the field — were associated with textual segments and analyzed in light of the foundations of the sociology of professions described by Eliot Freidson⁽¹⁵⁾, following the stages recommended by Thematic Content Analysis⁽¹⁸⁾. The anonymity of the oral sources was preserved, and participants were identified by the letters “RN” (registered nurse), followed by a number assigned at the time of the interview (e.g., RN1). The method was described according to the COnsolidated criteria for REporting Qualitative research (COREQ)⁽¹⁹⁾.

RESULTS

Three categories emerged from the codes identified in the analysis (Figure 1): Motivation for choosing nursing, which includes aspects related to choosing the profession regardless of professional category; Representation of the nursing technician, which presents registered nurses’ perceptions regarding the technical-level role, even after transitioning to another professional position; and Challenges of career transition, which demonstrates the main issues faced by registered nurses during this transition process.



Figure 1 – Families and codes corresponding to the transition and challenges faced by nurses. Network of meanings and coding extracted from ATLAS.ti®

Source: prepared by the authors (2025).

Motivation for choosing nursing

This category reveals that the main motivations for choosing the nursing technician profession were the ease of entering the labor market, identification with caregiving, and family influence, as illustrated below:

[...] I looked for a profession and eventually decided to become a NT because it would be easier for me to enter the labor market [...] (RN1).

[...] since elementary school, I had a greater interest in science subjects and especially in anatomy. In addition, many people in my family work in the biological sciences field, particularly nursing. I believe this frequent contact influenced my choice of nursing [...] (RN6).

[...] my parents were always supportive and very proud to tell everyone that I was the nurse in the family. Nursing has always been highly valued within my family [...] (RN12).

[...] since childhood, I liked taking care of my dolls. Over the years, I realized that I truly enjoyed helping people who needed care, especially my family members, and then I decided to study nursing [...] (RN15).

Regarding the motivations that encouraged participants to pursue undergraduate nursing education, the search for greater knowledge and improved financial conditions stood out strongly.

[...] I wanted to better understand the care I provided. I looked up to the registered nurse on my shift and decided to pursue this profession [...] (RN1).

[...] I needed a profession when I enrolled in the NT program. I did not know I would enjoy it so much. I always admired the registered nurse on my shift [...] (RN10).

[...] to achieve financial growth in the field I truly enjoyed working in [...] (RN2).

[...] my family always supported and encouraged me in the technical program and even more in pursuing professional growth through undergraduate education, graduate studies, and a master's degree [...] (RN2).

[...] while working as a nursing technician, my admiration for the profession increased, and after talking with family members, I received encouragement to pursue it [...] (RN9).

[...] my greatest motivation was the desire to specialize and enter the labor market with greater knowledge [...] (RN3).

Representation of the nursing technician

Regarding the experiences of registered nurses concerning what the nursing technician role represents, most participants (16) stated that technical-level training is highly important for the acquisition of dexterity and technical skills, in addition to considering this professional essential to healthcare teams.

[...] dexterity and skills that I learned as a nursing technician [...] (RN1).

[...] the nursing technician is essential, fundamental, indispensable to the team. They are the ones who know what is happening with the patient every second of the shift [...] (RN2).

[...] an essential part of care, the professional who remains closest to the patient [...] (RN4).

[...] it represents a different perspective regarding the patient and the team. It helps me understand and identify the needs of the nursing technician [...] (RN9).

Challenges of career transition

Changing professional categories is neither simple nor less challenging than entering a new profession. The registered nurses revealed that the main difficulties are related to the process of detaching themselves from the professional category they had previously occupied, as if they were putting on a new set of clothes.

[...] the challenge is always knowing how to separate things, understanding that, as a nursing technician, you need to respect the registered nurse as the leader and recognize that, at that moment, you are not the reference professional [...] (RN2).

[...] initially, my greatest challenge was being able to separate the two roles: knowing how to manage the team and gain their respect. When I started working as a registered nurse, I worked with the same team I had previously worked with as a nursing technician, and I thought this could be harmful; however, I was mistaken. I managed to maintain my position as a registered nurse within the same team without belittling or harming the people around me [...] (RN5).

There is also the issue of entering the labor market as a registered nurse, which may not occur immediately.

[...] my insertion into the labor market was difficult. It took eight months for me to get a job. Being a nursing technician did not make any difference [...] (RN1).

In addition, being tested by the work team appears to be a constant experience in this environment, considering that nine registered nurses reported difficulties of this nature.

[...] the greatest challenge is leadership. It is knowing how to delegate tasks, establish limits, and comply with institutional rules. It is maintaining a light and respectful work environment [...] (RN9).

[...] the greatest challenge was related to the team, when you are a nursing technician and become a registered nurse. Especially within the same institution, people look at you and judge you, as if anything you do means you think too highly of yourself or are interfering too much. The greatest challenge is maintaining authority with the team [...] (RN3).

[...] the challenge was realizing that I was being tested... I felt tested by the team [...] (RN1).

DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the work trajectories and educational background of nursing technicians implies understanding their professional pathways up to the present professional context. Work constitutes an opportunity for transformation and intervention in the world, through which individuals shape their own trajectories⁽²⁰⁾.

Enjoying what one does represents a way of perceiving the social value of work and, for this reason, has often been associated with motivation for choosing a profession. In addition to this affinity with nursing, the nurses' and nursing technicians' statements revealed the influence of family on their professional choices. This aspect may be related to individuals' recognition of nursing work. Both motivations are strongly associated with the concepts of identity and recognition, which tend to be better understood when interconnected^(21,22). Connections with caregiving emerge very early in life and, in many cases, analogies with caring for dolls, still present in childhood play, influence the choice of a health-related profession later in life. Care practice consists of applying knowledge in concrete situations and conditions involving both those who receive care and those who provide it. Thus, the internal and external goods associated with these professionals are highlighted through the meaning and socially legitimate power of the profession, moving from subjectivity toward rationality⁽²²⁾. This occurs because knowledge and professional credentials distinguish professional identity before society, promote empowerment, and generate a sense of social belonging⁽²³⁻²⁴⁾.

When nursing technicians choose to pursue undergraduate nursing education, they envision obtaining the long-desired degree diploma. To achieve this, they often attend evening courses at private educational institutions, which are generally the institutions that make this trajectory possible. This movement represents a struggle for better qualifications within the labor market⁽²⁵⁾. The study *"Perfil da Enfermagem no Brasil"* (Nursing Profile in Brazil)⁽³⁾ shows that 78.8% of nursing technicians who pursue higher education graduate from private institutions, with more than 40% attending evening classes⁽⁴⁾.

The work performed by nursing technicians is characterized by a basic practice involving simple nursing procedures, and the degree of complexity of these actions results from practical and mechanical appropriation without the acquisition of broader knowledge⁽²⁶⁾. The expansion of knowledge appears to constitute a pursuit among nursing technicians associated with career transition, as well as with achieving better salary conditions and greater independence and professional autonomy in nursing^(25,27). The desire for professional advancement encompasses personal issues, including financial circumstances after obtaining a new professional position. This process may be viewed as a search for social prestige within a given field or profession, with the intention of expanding professional recognition and status^(21,24).

This study highlights the representation that the nursing technician role holds for these registered nurses, since they continued to recognize the importance of this professional category. Mastery of technical and procedural skills was identified as a distinguishing characteristic among these professionals^(2,9). However, this emphasis on technical skills may indicate possible difficulties in articulating the dimensions of the work process, considering that nursing technicians are not responsible for managerial and teaching dimensions within the context of professional practice and legislation⁽⁹⁾. Therefore, transitioning between professional categories requires different adaptations, demanding time and dedication.

The challenges reported by the registered nurses participating in this study corroborate findings from previous studies, especially regarding the difficulty of distancing themselves from the professional category previously occupied. This occurs because registered nurses are assigned the role of coordinating and supervising the other members of the nursing team. These managerial activities involving the entire team work process include aspects centered on hierarchy and autonomy.

After graduation, nursing technicians tend to broaden their professional perspectives, transforming and reconstructing previous conceptions. These modifications, which ultimately define a profession, require a well-established theoretical foundation, as well as standards of professional conduct and expertise^(15,25).

One of the challenges mentioned by the registered nurses in this study refers to the ability to enter the labor market after changing professional roles. Leadership skills are among the main competencies required for nursing practice. In this context, it is important to emphasize the relevance of curricular activities that include the development of management and leadership competencies in order to better prepare registered nurses to practice with greater confidence⁽²⁵⁾. Added to this challenge is the fact that some registered nurses begin managing and leading teams of which they were previously members as nursing technicians. For this reason, they must overcome prejudice and judgment while also conveying credibility in their professional actions⁽²⁸⁾.

Furthermore, professional education follows the demands imposed by society and by the experienced social and historical context. This highlights discussions at both individual and collective levels, expressed through the aptitudes and desires of each individual as well as through demands related to social and governmental policies. As observed in this study, the specificities of the educational trajectory from nursing technician to registered nurse reveal the contradictions present throughout the historical development of this process: at times marked by the need to expand knowledge in order to care for and assist others, in accordance with the characteristics of the professional organization of nursing; at other times marked by the search for economic conditions necessary for survival⁽⁴⁾.

It is noteworthy that nursing technicians demonstrate motivation for collective work and have been developing greater critical awareness and theoretical capacity regarding their actions and observations. This also broadens the search for information and education aimed at professional autonomy, given the difficulties reported by registered nurses in adapting to managerial functions. Many of these professionals were previously members of nursing technician teams that they now coordinate as registered nurses⁽²⁹⁾.

From this perspective, despite the challenges identified, the commitment of registered nurses to remain in the profession should be emphasized, motivated by personal issues but, above all, by social issues that demonstrate recognition of the usefulness and importance of their work.

The results of this study reveal significant implications for nursing education and management. In the educational field, they reinforce the need for curricula that value the integration of theory and practice, encouraging the development of managerial competencies from initial education onward and promoting reflections on the professional identity of registered nurses transitioning from technical-level to higher education. In the field of management, the findings highlight the importance of institutional strategies that promote the inclusion and appreciation of professionals undergoing this transition, recognizing their previous experiences and creating environments that encourage autonomy, protagonism, and shared responsibility in care. Thus, strengthening managerial and educational dimensions contributes not only to improving professional practice, but also to enhancing the quality of healthcare and consolidating nursing as a social and scientific practice.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The professional trajectory of registered nurses who were previously nursing technicians was shown, in this study, to be especially motivated by personal issues, primarily related to identification with the profession and enjoyment of caregiving. The motivations for pursuing undergraduate education as registered nurses are also personal in nature and aimed at professional growth, especially regarding the acquisition of knowledge and improvement of financial conditions, which are relevant aspects of professionalization.

The challenges identified are strongly associated with this change in “professional attire”, in the sense of reaffirming themselves in the new professional role they occupy, which may constitute a delicate process requiring patience and persistence.

The results of this study reveal that, in addition to describing the transition from nursing technician to professionalization as a registered nurse, it was possible to identify that personal and professional motivations for remaining in nursing are strongly associated with characteristics related to professionalization.

This study represents an important contribution to nursing, as it enables higher education institutions and health services that receive these registered nurses to adapt their educational and training practices, promoting the development of competencies related to leadership and nursing team management.

As limitations, some difficulties related to conducting the interviews may be highlighted, such as participants' lack of time and the limited sample size, which could be expanded in other contexts.

The findings contribute to improving nursing education and personnel management policies, strengthening the professional identity of registered nurses who graduated from technical-level education.

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Submission: 18 Nov 2025

Reformulation: 30 Mar 2026

Approval: 31 Mar 2026

Editor-in-Chief: Deybson Borba de Almeida

Scientific Editor: Maria Angélica de Almeida Peres

Ad hoc reviewers:

Herica Silva Dutra; Rodrigo Nogueira da Silva

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Conception of the study: LADS, MLRB

Data collection: LADS, MLRB

Data analysis: LADS, MLRB

Manuscript writing: LADS, MLRB

Critical revision for important intellectual content: MLRB, MICS, BPC, ECNF