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# Sociological Aspects of Nursing Identity Development

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## Abstract

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This article presents the development of nursing identity with a brief review of the situation in the Republic of Croatia. The focus is on the conceptual interpretation of identity and its impact on the formation of individual identity in the social context. The postulate of contribution is manifested in the presentation of different authors' perspectives on the concept of nursing identity, emphasizing the ambiguity of this term. Special emphasis is placed on the analysis of nursing identity development, exploring the influence of traditional and modern social frameworks. The historical evolutionary path of nursing and the way in which gender stereotypes limit its progress are presented. Additionally, key components of contemporary nursing are highlighted, emphasizing the importance of academic education, research and theoretical development within nursing. Finally, the current issues of nursing within the Republic of Croatia were addressed, emphasizing the need for inclusive and modern nursing based on academic knowledge and social engagement.

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## Introduction

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The excessive frequency of using the term “identity” in everyday interaction has resulted in its vagueness and multiple meanings. Numerous authors have devoted themselves to understanding and defining identity, whereby Rade Kalanj (2010), according to Brubaker, emphasizes the complexity of the term “identity”, marking it as a term which is too ambiguous, oscillating between solid and fragile meanings, essentialist and constructionist nuances (1).

In the same tone, Kalanj (2010), according to Castells, emphasizes:

“Identity, regardless of changes in life-historical circumstances, is always what ‘I’ or ‘we’ think about ourselves or others and what others think about us, and to that extent it is a fundamental, indeed, a primordial category of human experience, so primordial that it would not be an exaggeration to characterize it as an identity ontology. It has its strength regardless of our will or contestation, and therefore it is no coincidence that some authors thematize it as “the power of identity” (1).

This view emphasizes the key role of identity in the formation of human experience and points to its undeniable importance despite the changes and challenges of life.

The development of an individual’s identity is a complex process which includes social and cultural aspects, such as racial, professional and gender identity. These identities often derive from others’ assumptions about us, shaping our perception of ourselves. Through the process of socialization, the individual builds their identity as part of the social whole (2).

Nursing, as a profession which has evolved since the 19th century, acquired an autonomous status only in the 1960s, after long-term efforts aimed at shaping its own identity. During the 1980s, nursing proactively incorporated nursing practices, moving toward qualitative methods in the humanities. The path from a controversial and marginalized profession to complete social and professional affirmation was a challenging process. Emphasis should be placed on the fact that today nursing is unavoidable and necessary for modern society and is an integral part of the healthcare system (3).

## The identity of nursing

The turning point in attempts to define the identity of nursing rests in the 20th century, when the sense, meaning and values of nursing began to be strengthened in the academic environment, which represents a stronghold for the formation of unique knowledge and skills necessary for the development of a professional identity. In other words, the art of nursing encompasses the care about the sick as well as the care about the healthy, and in recent decades, special attention has been paid to building the identity of nursing, which would contribute to the development of theories and research in nursing (3).

Furthermore, the nursing profession has its own history, which makes it much more difficult to build a professional identity precisely because of the knowledge that no education was necessary to perform nursing work, and women of lower social status and without education were the ones who practiced nursing. However, an individual’s perception of themselves in a professional role affects professional development, but also the promotion of their own profession, and the acquisition of characteristics, values and experience of nurses is important for developing the attractiveness of the profession, especially for younger generations who have not yet formed an opinion about the identity of a particular profession (4).

In recent years, the vision of the development of the nursing profession has been expanding in order to improve the health culture of the entire population. Considering that nurses represent patients and their families in the social community, their well-being is based on the construction of social determinants of health in the provision of quality healthcare (5).

## The identity of nursing in pre-modern society

The development of nursing throughout history reflects the evolution of the assumptions which shaped its concept. According to Virginia Henderson, healthcare is the core area of nursing, encompassing the care of the healthy and sick individuals who need help. Nursing is described as the art of providing healthcare, while emphasizing its vocational character, and is recognized as a profession (6).

By studying the history of nursing, we can identify key periods which shaped the role and significance of nurses. In the pre-modern period, caring for the

sick was predominantly the responsibility of female members of the family or community, who were using techniques and plants with positive effects. In ancient cultures such as Egypt, Babylon and China, we find records of nurses in religious books. The Christian period saw the involvement of matrons and deaconesses in caring for the sick, encouraging education and laying the foundations for the development of educated nurses. The Renaissance brought an accelerated development of medicine, but the perception of nursing as a "religious" vocation stagnated. In the "dark" 16th century, nursing became undesirable due to low wages and harsh conditions. Changes began with St. Vincent de Paul in the 16th century and Thomas Fliedner and Florence Nightingale in the 19th century (7).

Florence Nightingale, the founder of nursing, is a symbol of hope and compassion. She devoted her life's calling to serving God and developing discipline in caring for the sick, laying the foundations of modern nursing. Her work during the Crimean War emphasized the importance of nurse education, and her greatest contribution is considered to be the introduction of the administrative role of the nurse (8).

The traditional portrayal of nurses has often depicted them as oppressed and marginalized by doctors, resulting in low self-esteem on a personal and professional level. These stereotypes, together with the determinants of working conditions, shared values and level of education, shaped the development of nurses' professional identity (9).

Gender stereotypes, which consider women to be biological and rational, are also reflected in the nursing profession. A historical review of various cultures attributes the reproductive role to the concept of woman, which is associated with care and concern for the family and the home. The assigned roles limit women and favor the discrimination of social values. Nursing has always been in collision with the variables of gender which are manifested by the gap between men and women through the assigned roles in nursing. In the same way, the mentioned stereotypes affect the nurses' perception of themselves, which are focused on the social representation of the nursing profession. At the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, the nursing profession was not promoted, but public perception had negative connotations, which was also influenced by the media, which "perpetuated stereotypes about the nurse as an angel of mercy, a doctor's maid and a sexy nurse

or sexual object" (10) and the nurse became invisible to society (10).

The development of nursing education lays the foundations of modern nursing, setting high standards and ethical principles. In the 20th century, morality and virtue became key criteria for admission to nursing schools (7). This continuous process of evolution is reflected in the contemporary understanding and professional identity of nurses.

### **The identity of nursing in modern society**

Modern society implies the synergy of history and society through elements of nature which are constantly evolving. The shaping of society is intertwined with science and the development of practical skills, which is manifested through the work of the individual (11).

Professional work influences the construction of identity based on the characteristics which shape a profession, among which the following stand out: "its historical constitution, special occupational culture, specific knowledge and specific dialect" (12). The parameters which make a profession "professional" are recognition of the status by the state, educational and public institutions and in defining the criteria necessary for its training (12).

Within nursing, the fundamental goal is to define the key elements of constructing a professional identity, and the following are stated: "values and ethics, knowledge, nurse as a leader and professional behavior" (13), the implementation of which would benefit both nurses and patients. The mentioned elements are necessary in describing and bringing nursing closer to students, other nurses and society in general. Also, these elements can be used to further analyze the current situation and improve one's own areas for progress (13).

Modern society realizes its arbitrariness through work and becomes useful for society as a whole, and highlighting the importance of science and art is a feature of sophistication that embodies greater freedom and humanity (11).

Sociological research on the qualities needed in building the profession culminated between the 1950s and 1980s, a period in which leading nursing officials sought guidance in the establishment of nursing. A university professor of sociology, Dr. Merton, helped

the nursing association understand the demands of the profession, which he described as: "an organization of practitioners who judge each other as professionally competent and who have joined together to perform social functions that they cannot perform separately as individuals" (14).

The development of the professionalization of nurses is much discussed at the global level, but only the development of nursing guidelines and protocols has confirmed that nurses possess immense knowledge and skills, although the real core of nursing is still unclear. The goal of nursing should be focused on the development of theories, research and skills so that the society recognizes the empirical and specialist development of nursing and its contribution to society (9).

On that track, the foundations and characteristics of the nursing profession were laid, which became the area of interest and the establishment of professional associations of nurses. The basic premise of the further development of nursing has become global networking and the availability of information related to the discipline of nursing (14).

In recent years, social changes caused by the occurrence of events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the declaration by the WHO of 2020 as the Year of Nurses and Midwives, as well as the development of various possibilities for the transmission of information sources, and the development of communication channels and social networks have improved the visibility of the nursing profession. The influence of the mentioned events reduced gender stereotypes in nursing and improved the knowledge and attractiveness of the nursing profession (10).

Nurses continue to develop their professional identity by maintaining relationships with other nurses, promoting lifelong education, information exchange and developing common values in order to visualize the professional identity of nurses in the right way (15). Dynamism and flexibility are the most important concepts in improving the provision of health care (16).

### **Dynamics of nursing identity in a modern (postmodern) context**

Étienne Wenger, a well-known theorist, believes that identity "...is to be lived, which means that identity is the core of human existence and is fundamentally an experience which involves participation and reifi-

cation" (17). He defines identity as the intersection between the individual and the collective. Wenger points out that creating one's own idea about the profession can be crucial for establishing a professional identity within the community (17).

Changes in the way and provision of modern nursing care are conditioned by the integration of new health reforms and the use of different technologies in work, which changes the role and expectations of nurses, requiring rapid adaptation with the aim of achieving fluidity in work (16). Despite the fact that nursing is associated with the qualities of self-sacrifice, honesty and moral integrity, the development of professional identity is associated with personal identity, which includes emotional and behavioral determinants in the process of self-acceptance and self-identification with the profession (17).

The development of a professional identity in nursing is deeply rooted in personal values, attitudes and beliefs, and all of this is immersed in the context of the characteristics and deep understanding of the nursing profession. A key phase of professional identity formation begins during undergraduate nursing education, where theory and practice align to shape a basic understanding of the role of the nurse. The initial steps in the formation of a professional identity are experienced through the prism of theoretical concepts and their concrete application in the clinical environment. Novice nurses actively adapt and refine their professional identity as they gradually integrate into the workforce. The adaptation process is not just a one-time event, but a continuous series of adaptations based on newly acquired knowledge, developed skills, assumed roles, assigned responsibilities and changes in work environments. Through the accumulation of personal and professional experiences, nurses build their professional identity, resulting in a dynamic and adaptive process of evolution. This dynamism enables adaptation to new standards of practice, technological innovations, ethical norms and contemporary challenges in the healthcare system. Professional identity becomes a kind of permanent version which reflects the constant effort of nurses to improve their own expertise (16).

Moreover, the development of the nursing profession is affected by the increased turnover and shortage of nurses due to the possibility of choice in seeking to achieve self-realization, a sense of belonging to an organization and satisfaction in work (17).

Migration of nurses is becoming a social problem motivated by the desire to improve the standard of living and working conditions, as well as the possibility of advancement in the profession (18).

The decision to stay in a profession or organization is often associated with a sense of empathy towards oneself and patients, a key factor in the growth and development of nursing, and attracting new generations of nurses to the profession (17).

The global migration of health professionals poses a number of moral, legal and political challenges that need to be addressed through additional initiatives aimed at developing strategies to retain qualified professionals (19).

Therefore, the continuous progressive development of the nurses' professional identity not only promotes their personal growth, but also plays a key role in providing high-quality healthcare. This evolutionary process supports a deep understanding and commitment to the profession, creating a foundation for excellence in nursing practice and contributing to the quality of the healthcare system (16).

### **Challenges of nursing identity development in the Republic of Croatia**

In the past decades, we have witnessed significant progress in the development of nursing in the Republic of Croatia. A key step towards the professionalization of nursing was achieved through the establishment of regulations through legislation, especially the adoption of the Act on Nursing. This law precisely defines the competencies of nurses, marking a turning point in the regulation of the profession and providing clear guidelines for the performance of their tasks.

Despite the achievements, we face nursing challenges in the Republic of Croatia, aligned with global trends. Lack of nurses and difficult working conditions are key problems. Research by the authors Kurtović, Friganović, Čukljek, Vidmanić, Stievano (2021) emphasizes the need for urgent measures to solve the issue of staff shortages and improve the working environment of the profession (20).

Through the development of the identity of nursing, especially through strengthening the reputation of nurses by encouraging self-determination and self-confidence, the research lays the foundations for the further development of the profession (20).

This approach represents a key element in the development of modern nursing in the Republic of Croatia with an emphasis on adequate management of complex health interventions, including the application of advanced technology and effective disease management. In accordance with modern standards of nursing practice, the main role of nurses is to identify and meet the specific needs of patients, develop comprehensive nursing care plans and evaluate the outcome of interventions within the framework of primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare (20).

Given the evolution of the healthcare sector, nurses today are taking on additional responsibilities, requiring a diverse set of skills. Education is focused on raising the expertise of nursing staff to facilitate the provision of patient-centered care. Integration of patients into interdisciplinary teams, evidence-based practice, continuous improvement of the quality of care and optimal use of health information technology are becoming key elements of modern nursing (20).

This comprehensive approach not only promotes the expertise of the nursing staff, but also supports further progress in the provision of high-quality healthcare in the Republic of Croatia.

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## **Conclusion**

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Through studying the development of the identity of nursing throughout history, we observe the complexity and dynamics that shaped this profession. The excessive use of the term "identity" in today's everyday interaction points to the challenges we face when defining this complex category. The identity of nursing, like any other identity, arises from the interplay of individual and collective experience.

In pre-modern society, nursing evolved from the tradition of caring for the sick, and the identity of nurses was shaped through religious and social norms. Female gender stereotypes and low social status created challenges for the development of nurses' professional identity. Throughout history, nursing has gone through phases from marginalization to affirmation, with challenges such as lack of education and low self-esteem, leaving their mark on the profession's identity.

In modern society, the professionalization of nursing brings a new context in the formation of identity. Respect for the state, educational institutions and the public is essential for the recognition of the status of nurses as professionals. The development of knowledge, ethical values and management in accordance with the changes in the healthcare system contribute to the formation of the modern identity of nursing.

Ultimately, nursing identity is a complex entity which has evolved throughout history, adapting to social changes and reflecting various challenges. Modern nursing requires flexibility, expertise and the promotion of autonomy in order to respond to the demands of a complex healthcare system. Improving the professional identity of nurses is essential for achieving high standards of care and preserving the vital role of nursing in society.

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## SOCIOLOŠKI ASPEKTI RAZVOJA IDENTITETA SESTRINSTVA

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### Sažetak

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U radu je prikazan razvoj identiteta sestriinstva s kratkim osvrtom na stanje u Republici Hrvatskoj. Fokus je stavljen na konceptualnu interpretaciju identiteta te njegov utjecaj na formiranje individualnog identiteta u društvenom kontekstu. Doprinos se manifestira u prikazu različitih autorskih perspektiva na koncept identiteta sestriinstva, naglašavajući višeznačnost tog pojma. Poseban naglasak stavljen je na analizu razvoja identiteta sestriinstva, istražujući utjecaj tradicionalnih i modernih društvenih okvira. Prikazan je povijesni put sestriinstva te način na koji rodni stereotipi ograničavaju njegov napredak. Dodatno, istaknute su ključne komponente suvremenog sestriinstva, naglašavajući važnost akademskog obrazovanja, istraživanja i teorijskog razvoja unutar sestriinstva. Na kraju, obrađena je aktualna problematika sestriinstva unutar Republike Hrvatske, naglašavajući potrebu za inkluzivnim i suvremenim sestriinstvom temeljenim na akademskom znanju i društvenom angažmanu.

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**Ključne riječi:** sestriinstvo, identitet, profesija, skrb, autonomija

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