

## SYSTEMATIC REVIEW ARTICLE

## The multidimensional concept of autonomy: a conceptual analysis using a scoping review

*O conceito multidimensional de autonomia: uma análise conceptual recorrendo a uma scoping review*

*El concepto multidimensional de autonomía: un análisis conceptual utilizando una scoping review*

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### Abstract

**Background:** Autonomy is a concept widely used by health professionals, however, there is some inconsistency in its use.

**Objective:** Map and analyze the concept of autonomy in existing evidence according to its application in different areas of knowledge.

**Review Method:** Scoping review based on the principles recommended by the Joanna Briggs Institute and the Walker e Avant conceptual analysis method. Two independent reviewers performed the relevance of the articles, the extraction and synthesis of the data.

**Presentation and interpretation of results:** In the review, 191 articles were included. Attributes of the concept of autonomy are: cognitive state, emotional intelligence, social situation, intellectual condition and physical condition.

**Conclusion:** Autonomy is a multifaceted concept. Nursing needs to develop interventions that clearly promote the person's autonomy.

**Keywords:** patient care; personal autonomy; concept formation; education, nursing; nursing; rehabilitation nursing

### Resumo

**Contexto:** A autonomia é um conceito largamente utilizado pelos profissionais de saúde, no entanto, denota-se alguma incoerência na sua utilização.

**Objetivo:** Mapear e analisar o conceito de autonomia na evidência existente de acordo com a sua aplicação nas diversas áreas do conhecimento.

**Método de revisão:** *Scoping review* com base nos princípios preconizados pelo *Joanna Briggs Institute* e pelo método de análise conceptual de Walker e Avant. Dois revisores independentes avaliaram a relevância dos artigos, a extração e síntese dos dados.

**Apresentação e interpretação dos resultados:** Foram incluídos 191 artigos na revisão. São atributos do conceito de autonomia - estado cognitivo, inteligência emocional, situação social, condição intelectual e condição física.

**Conclusão:** A autonomia é um conceito multifacetado. A enfermagem necessita de desenvolver intervenções que promovam claramente a autonomia da pessoa.

**Palavras-chave:** assistência ao paciente; autonomia pessoal; formação de conceito; educação em enfermagem; enfermagem; enfermagem em reabilitação

### Resumen

**Contexto:** La autonomía es un concepto ampliamente utilizado por los profesionales de la salud, sin embargo, existe cierta inconsistencia en su uso.

**Objetivo:** Mapear y analizar el concepto de autonomía en la evidencia existente según su aplicación en diferentes áreas del conocimiento.

**Método de revisión:** Revisión de alcance basada en los principios recomendados por el Instituto Joanna Briggs y el método de análisis conceptual de Walker y Avant. Dos revisores independientes realizaron la relevancia de los artículos, la extracción y síntesis de los datos.

**Presentación e interpretación de los resultados:** Se incluyeron 191 artículos en la revisión. Los atributos del concepto de autonomía son: estado cognitivo, inteligencia emocional, situación social, condición intelectual y condición física.

**Conclusión:** La autonomía es un concepto multifacético. La enfermería necesita desarrollar intervenciones que promuevan claramente la autonomía de la persona.

**Palabras clave:** atención al paciente; autonomía personal; formación de concepto; educación en enfermería; enfermería; enfermería en rehabilitación



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## Introduction

The relationship between the professionals, especially in the health area, and the patients should be based on the fundamental principle of respect for their autonomy. Autonomy implies the duty to respect decision-making capacity and involves two aspects that complement each other: 1) the recognition of an individual's ability to make their own decisions based on their values and beliefs, and 2) the promotion of conditions, including health interventions, to promote autonomy (Dzeng, 2019).

The concept of autonomy comprises several dimensions: Biological, Social, Psychological, and Spiritual, and its integration is essential to understand the true essence of the concept (Bouvet, 2018).

In the context of care delivery, most professionals use the term autonomy in their daily lives as an equivalent to physical-functional independence (Oberstadt et al., 2018). Autonomy is a very complex term that must be understood (Valero, 2019). Most professionals focus more on legal aspects, such as the protection of a right or the fulfillment of a duty, than on the personal and subjective aspects related to the patients' ability to decide independently (Bertilsson et al., 2015). Hence, the need to thoroughly analyze this concept. Autonomy is a concept widely used in the nursing discipline. Nonetheless, it requires complementary studies and alternative views that transfer it to a level of greater complexity, making it more operational in theory, research, and practice and enhancing its understanding (Sousa et al., 2018).

It is worth noting that the affirmation of nursing involves the clarification and application of its own body of knowledge (Sousa et al., 2018).

Concerning its objectives, this study aimed to map and analyze the concept of autonomy and its use in several areas of knowledge based on the available evidence and using Walker and Avant's model of conceptual analysis (Sousa et al., 2018).

A previous search conducted on JBI Database of Systematic Reviews and Implementation Reports, Cochrane Library, MEDLINE, and CINAHL did not find any published or ongoing scoping reviews on the concept of autonomy.

This scoping review aims to understand the content and the limits of the concept under analysis as comprehensively and consistently as possible. The resulting knowledge will enhance the understanding of health professionals, particularly nurses, who play a key role in promoting individual autonomy.

## Review method

The synthesis of evidence using systematic reviews is at the heart of evidence-based practice. A scoping review was conducted due to its main objectives: to map the existing

evidence underpinning a research area and identify gaps in the existing evidence (Peters et al., 2015).

This scoping review aimed to explore the existing evidence thoroughly to obtain the necessary rationale for analyzing the concept of autonomy. This research method has been widely used in recent years and added significant value to nursing as a profession and a discipline, allowing nurses to base their care on the best available evidence. The study followed all the steps recommended by the Joanna Briggs Institute (Peters et al., 2015).

The concept of autonomy was analyzed based on the assumptions of Walker and Avant's method of concept analysis, which is the most widely used method of concept analysis in the nursing profession because it is simple and easy to apply. The following steps were taken for this analysis: selecting the concept; determining the aims or purposes of analysis; identifying all possible uses of the concept; determining the defining attributes; identifying a model case; identifying borderline, related, invented, contrary, and illegitimate cases; identifying antecedents and consequences, and defining empirical referents (Sousa et al., 2018).

Using the participants, concept, and context (PCC) strategy, this scoping review included studies that: a) regarding the type of participants, address the ill person; b) regarding the concept, address the concept of autonomy; c) regarding the context, all contexts will be included, in the most diverse areas of knowledge, seeking to map the differences/similarities between the areas; d) regarding the type of studies, qualitative and quantitative primary studies and all types of literature reviews will be included.

## Search strategy

The search strategy included published studies and consisted of three steps: 1) Initial search of MEDLINE (via PubMed) and CINAHL (via EBSCO) databases, followed by an analysis of the text words in the titles and abstracts and the index terms used to describe the article; 2) Second search using all identified keywords and index terms in the included databases and the gray literature (Table 1); 3) The reference lists of the identified articles were searched for additional studies. Studies published in the last 10 years in English, Spanish, and Portuguese were considered for inclusion in this review.

Due to the significant amount of information on the concept, the most appropriate methodology for this review was the search for studies published in the last 10 years. The focus on the last 10 years takes into account that literature reviews are a crucial link between the health research results and evidence-based decision-making in the health area. Reviews must be valid and reliable to be useful. To this end, the methods used must be reliable, and reviews must reflect all results of relevant research, including the latest publications (Brooker et al., 2019).

**Table 1***Search strategy and search results by database*


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Database: Scopus  
 Filters: Excluding MEDLINE, last 10 years, English, Portuguese, Spanish  
 Records: 813  
 Search strategy (18 April 2020)

(( (TITLE-ABS-KEY ( patient\* ) ) AND ( TITLE-ABS-KEY ( independence ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( autonomy ) ) AND ( ( TITLE-ABS-KEY ( theory ) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ( concept ) ) ) ) AND NOT ( PMID ( 1\* ) OR PMID ( 2\* ) OR PMID ( 3\* ) OR PMID ( 4\* ) OR PMID ( 5\* ) OR PMID ( 6\* ) OR PMID ( 7\* ) OR PMID ( 8\* ) OR PMID ( 9\* ) )

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Database: CINAHL complete (via EBSCO)  
 Filters: Excluding MEDLINE, last 10 years, English, Portuguese, Spanish  
 Records: 313  
 Search strategy (18 April 2020)

S1 - MH Patients OR TI patient\* OR AB patient\*  
 S2 - MH Patient Autonomy OR TI independence OR AB independence  
 S3 - TI theory OR AB theory OR TI concept OR AB concept  
 S1 AND S2 AND S3

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Database: MEDLINE (VIA PUBMED)  
 Filters: last 10 years, English, Portuguese, Spanish  
 Records: 461  
 Search strategy (18 April 2020)

((Patients[MeSH Terms]) OR (patient\*[Title/Abstract])) AND (((Independent Living[MeSH Terms]) OR (Personal Autonomy[MeSH Terms])) OR (independence[Title/Abstract])) AND ((concept[Title/Abstract]) OR (theory[Title/Abstract]))

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Database: OPEN GREY  
 Filters: last 10 years, English, Portuguese, Spanish  
 Records: 5  
 Search strategy (18 April 2020)

(autonomy OR independence) AND patient AND theory

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**Data extraction**

Two independent reviewers screened the title and the abstract to decide on the relevance of the articles. Studies that met the inclusion criteria were retrieved in full text even when there were doubts about their relevance. Two independent reviewers analyzed the full text of the articles to verify whether or not they met the inclusion criteria. Any disagreements between reviewers were resolved through discussion or with a third reviewer.

The following information was extracted from the included studies: Identification of the study, country, study objective, study design, number and type of participants, area of knowledge, and main results.

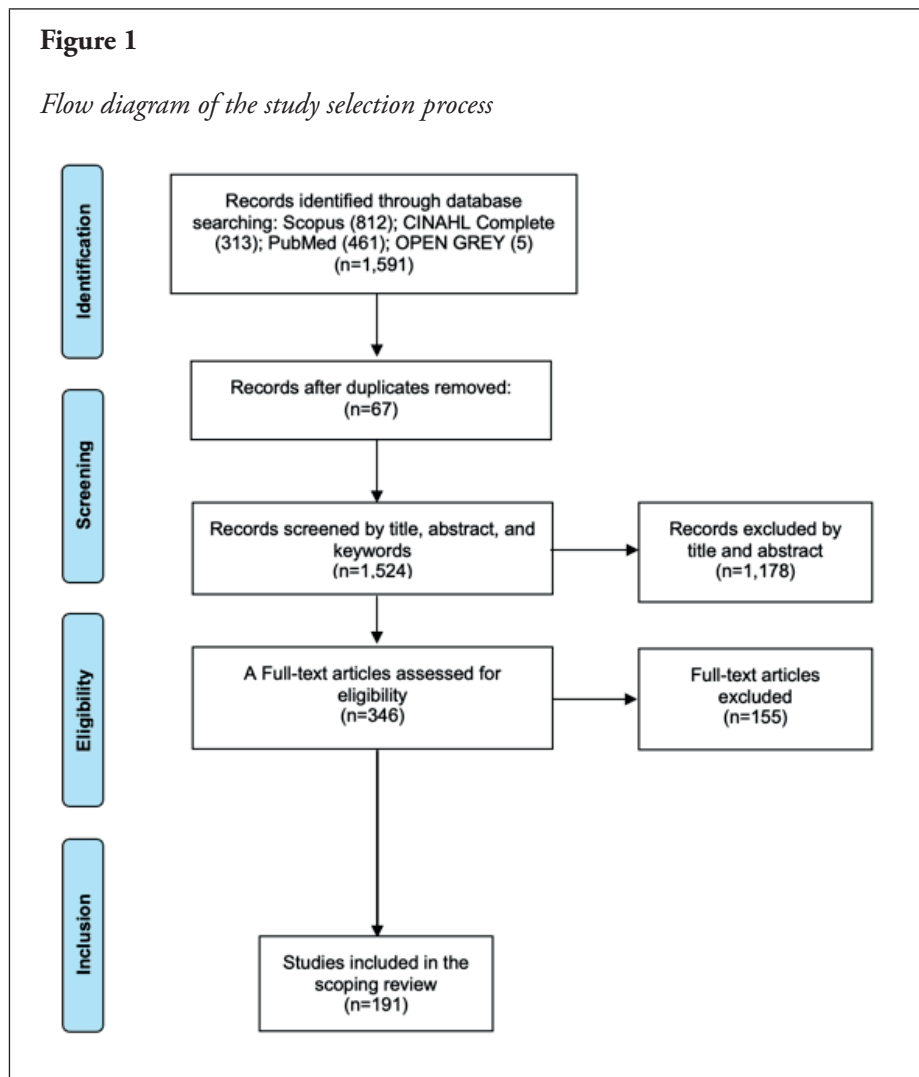
The mapped data will now be presented in a narrative format, in line with the objectives and focus of the scoping review, using tables and figures. As in the previous phase, data were synthesized and presented through consensus

between two reviewers. Any disagreements were resolved with a third reviewer.

This mapping identified the available scientific evidence, being the starting point for the conceptual analysis using Walker and Avant's model.

**Presentation of results**

As shown in Figure 1, the search identified 1,586 potentially relevant articles, of which 67 were excluded for being duplicates. Of the remaining 1,519 articles, 1,173 were excluded after title and abstract reading, and 155 articles were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria after full-text reading. After this selection process, 191 studies were included in this review.



### Interpretation of the results

After obtaining the mapping, a conceptual analysis was performed following Walker and Avant's model (Sousa et al., 2018).

Concerning the selection of the concept, the analysis shows that, in health-related areas of knowledge, the importance of promoting individual autonomy is highlighted to the extent that, in most cases, autonomy may be compromised or at risk. Autonomy comprises several dimensions: biological, social, psychological, and spiritual (Bouvet, 2018), and it is essential to implement interventions that promote it, particularly in the nursing discipline.

Autonomy is a value associated with a liberal perspective that emphasizes cultural values, such as freedom and privacy, and is a right of the individual as a unique human being (Bentwich et al., 2018). As a right, it is therefore important not to neglect it, understanding its contents and limits.

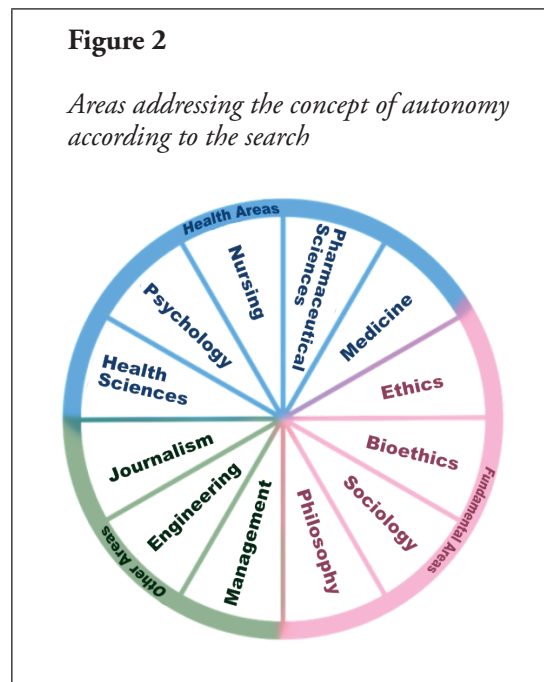
With regard to determining the aim of analysis, the results show that autonomy is a contextual phenomenon that is

influenced by culture (Eassey et al., 2019), particularly by the habits and customs of society. Although nursing interventions aimed at promoting autonomy are prescribed on a daily basis, the assessment of its applicability reveals that they refer to the promotion of independence or vice versa (Bennett et al., 2016), particularly regarding physical condition (Jacobs, 2019).

Autonomy is driven by an intrinsic source of motivation to have control over the self, one's fate. According to the self-determination theory (Eassey et al., 2019), controlling one's own life and behavior is having the freedom of choice and control over one's actions (Bouvet, 2018).

Regarding the identification of all possible uses of the concept, the researchers mapped its possible applications in the most diverse areas of knowledge, which, as a whole, complement each other.

Possible areas emerged from the reading to create groups of perspectives on autonomy, such as the health area itself, the fundamental areas of knowledge that support decisions in the health area, and other areas, as shown in Figure 2.



Many definitions are similar in some aspects and complementary in others.

The areas of intervention in autonomy in health refer to the concept and are related to the importance of literacy and empowerment (Bennett et al., 2016). These areas highlight the importance of a person's autonomy, especially in ensuring the capacity to act (Jacobs, 2019) and the opportunity to make decisions and act consciously, expressing self-government and the ability to control their own lives, showing their sensitivity, their feelings, and making their choices in the exercise of autonomy (Bouvet, 2018). It also stresses the importance of the social, economic, and professional situation and previous health experiences, which are important conditions for decision-making capacity (Bertilsson et al., 2015). Thus, the concept under analysis is dependent on other people because the individual lives in a society consisting of relational, family, social, structural, and situational dimensions (Brown & Salmon, 2019). In turn, these dimensions are the intrinsic sources of motivation to have control over one's destiny, life, and behavior. Therefore, there is a dynamic between social class, life history, race, gender, and cultural contexts, where there are often power relations (Bhola & Chaturvedi, 2017).

Psychology argues that self-perception is extremely important in leading an autonomous life, namely the perception of one's dignity and emotions, which presupposes the need for excellent emotional management skills and emotional intelligence (Calheiros et al., 2013).

The self-determination theory serves as a basis for most health professionals. This theory focuses on three psychological constructions that are necessary for self-determination: autonomy, involving the desire to be the source of one's own behavior, without the interference of others; competence, involving the need to feel effective in one's actions; and relatedness, involving the desire to feel connected to others, belong to a group and be valued (Brown & Salmon, 2019; Hanlon et al., 2019).

In fundamental areas, such as ethics and bioethics, au-

tonomy derives from two Greek words: *auto* meaning *self* and *nomos* meaning *law*, which can be translated into *I give myself the law, I am the owner and master of my own decisions* (Henry et al., 2015). The concept of autonomy gives the person their own identity, which is reflected in their decisions (Henry et al., 2015). Autonomy cannot be reduced to executive competence in individual decisions. Moreover, the respect for autonomy cannot be interpreted as a mere lack of interference in the decisions made. For conscious decision-making, the individual needs to be adequately informed and have an intellectual understanding of the subject. Only then will the individual be able to decide on specific issues, free of internal or external restrictions (Henry et al., 2015).

Concerning autonomy, this decision-making depends directly on the social environment, marked by economics, politics, ethnicity, gender, and culture, being subjected to the integration of all these factors (Krishna et al., 2015). Some philosophers see autonomy as reason, freedom, desire, morality, and interiority. In this context, autonomy is a multidimensional concept involving decisional, executive, functional, informative, and narrative autonomy (Valero, 2019). Philosophers see autonomy as reason, expressed will, freedom of choice, desire, and morality, considering these terms equivalent. For Kant, for example, autonomy is the right to freedom, expression, and the manifestation of one's will to do or not what one wants, depending on one's psychological capacity to choose paths, assume responsibilities, and self-govern (Henry et al., 2015).

In turn, sociology highlights that autonomy presupposes the intellectual capacity for conscious decision-making, which results from the need to feel volitional and master of one's actions, adding that, at this level, an individual can be autonomous regardless of being physically dependent (Benson et al., 2019).

Engineering, management, and journalism also give their opinion about autonomy, referring that autonomy means



experiencing volition and empowerment and promoting competence to cope with health issues and life in general (Lamine et al., 2019).


Regarding the determination of the defining attributes and the definition of empirical referents, it was possible to check all possible uses of the concept of autonomy and analyze the various definitions, which allowed researchers to determine the characteristics of the concept under analysis.

Several aspects emerged considering the attributes, antecedents, and consequences involved in this topic. The identified attributes provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

It should be noted that the concept of autonomy comprises a continuous and broad process, guided by aspects such as cognitive state, emotional intelligence, social situation, intellectual condition, and physical condition, as can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Interpretation of the concept of Autonomy*

Antecedents	Attributes	Consequences
Freedom of action;	Cognitive state Emotional intelligence Social situation Intellectual condition Physical condition	Autonomous individuals are conscious and oriented, able to effectively manage the emotions of everyday life, socially well integrated, have the capacity to decide in all areas of life, as long as they are well informed. Autonomous individuals have the intellectual and physical capacity to exercise their own will according to their beliefs, values, and culture.
Ability to act intentionally;		
Informed consent, decision-making capacity, and surrogate decision-making for persons who have been declared mentally “incompetent”;		
Adequate information;		
Absence of unwanted interference;		
Ability to reflect;		
People are socially integrated into the social context, shaped by a network of social determinants.		

Concerning the identification of a case for nursing practice, one example can be that of a quadriplegic patient who is physically dependent on others for performing tasks, but conscious and oriented, that is, with full cognitive functions, who can effectively manage emotions and connect to others efficiently. To fully achieve the concept of autonomy, this patient will require support in their physical adaptation, the help of third parties, and training about adaptive strategies. As such, health professionals, particularly nurses, should consider the potential for the patient’s autonomy and prescribe, implement, and evaluate interventions that meet the needs involved in the concept of autonomy, which will necessarily involve asking the patient about their preferences and replace them in activities that they cannot perform alone. Regarding decision-making, health professionals should support the empowered patient without influencing their decision-making, and prescribe, implement, and evaluate interventions to increase their health literacy and maintain/restore their emotional intelligence.

The importance of this study is justified by the accuracy in the diagnosis, prescription, and evaluation of nursing interventions, which depend on the satisfaction of patient needs, to maintain and promote patient autonomy. In nursing, as in other disciplines, concepts must be accurately defined. However, this aspect is particularly important in nursing because nurses, due to their close contact with the patient, implement autonomy in clinical practice in its various aspects.

Therefore, autonomy is perceived as a multidimensional concept involving physical, cognitive, intellectual, and social skills, as well as emotional intelligence. Although

the most diverse areas of knowledge share the same opinion about the concept of autonomy, this study showed that there are studies in the different areas that refer to autonomy as a mere decision-making ability and the fulfillment of informed consent (Bouvet, 2018).

Some articles divide autonomy into decisional autonomy, relational autonomy, and executive autonomy. Decisional autonomy refers to the ability and freedom to make decisions, executive autonomy refers to the ability and freedom to carry out those same decisions, and relational autonomy refers to the fact that the individual is connected to their social environment and depends on it to live, as they are dependent on constraints such as economics, gender, culture, among other aspects (Brown & Salmon, 2019). Other articles refer to autonomy as a psychological need in the self-determination theory, where autonomy is at the origin of one’s behavior and the desire to be and exercise free will in the choice of objectives, with the agent feeling entirely volitional or free to engage in a given behavior (Hanlon et al., 2019). This theory comprises two other needs: competence and relatedness. At this point, however, a question must be asked. To exercise autonomy in full, is it not necessary to have competence, feel it, and be able to connect to others? From the authors’ perspective, autonomy is the self-determination theory itself because individuals must have cognitive, intellectual, and social skills, emotional intelligence, and physical ability to act according to their will. Individuals cannot be autonomous if they do not have cognitive skills (Jacobs, 2019).

An individual must feel empowered to make autonomous decisions, with health literacy playing a key role here. Health literacy is an essential tool for improving the

health of the populations (Brown & Salmon, 2019). The maintenance of autonomy through the development of intellectual capacity, emotion management, adaptation to the new physical condition, social involvement is ensured by empowerment (Henry et al., 2015; Brown & Salmon, 2019). This empowerment promotes autonomy, safety, health, authentic social relationships, and dignity. If autonomy is promoted, quality of life and human dignity are also guaranteed (Henry et al., 2015).

In the therapeutic relationship, patient autonomy presupposes competencies, the freedom to make conscious choices within the existing possibilities, and the assumption of the risks of those actions or choices. If they are aware of themselves and their needs, the individual and the health professional jointly make the best decisions and implement the most appropriate procedures in a conscious decision-making process, without the professional contradicting this decision (Brown & Salmon, 2019).

In summary, the concept of autonomy is multidimensional, including the need for the individual to have intellectual, cognitive, social, and physical skills and emotional intelligence. As such, the promotion/maintenance of autonomy is a difficult task. However, it is possible to achieve autonomy in full by introducing all the essential factors. Respect for each person's autonomy is fundamental, regardless of whether or not it is ideal. As professionals of proximity and relationship in the health-disease transition processes, nurses must ensure respect for autonomy through the prescription, implementation, and continuous evaluation of nursing interventions that maintain and promote the concept/right under analysis (Bennett et al., 2016). It is therefore imperative to integrate this concept, in its true essence, into the documentation standards of information systems in use in health units in Portugal and design a self-assessment instrument that allows nursing professionals to assess how they promote autonomy.

Determining the specific aspect of autonomy that has been affected is the first step in restoring, protecting, promoting, and respecting autonomy (Valero, 2019).

## Conclusion

This study identified the various components of the concept of autonomy, gathered data about it (although in some cases the attributes of the concept are implicit), and built a broader and more comprehensive concept than those identified. Therefore, the concept of autonomy involves cognitive capacity, intellectual capacity, emotional intelligence, social situation, and physical capacity.

This study had some limitations, namely the fact that it includes only studies published in the last 10 years, and, as such, other relevant evidence may not have been included. Moreover, the search conducted in gray literature may not have been very comprehensive.

Health professionals, especially nurses, can use the evidence provided by this study as a relevant basis for the development of evidence-based nursing interventions aimed to promote, protect, and respect autonomy and, consequently, quality of life. The scientific evidence re-

veals that nursing, as a profession, values interventions aimed at obtaining informed consent and promoting the ability to carry out activities of daily living. Nevertheless, nursing as a discipline is oriented towards the respect for the concept of autonomy as a whole.

Based on the mapped and analyzed evidence, a self-assessment instrument should be designed for nurses to assess how they promote autonomy. This is a first step for increasing the professionals' awareness about the importance of the concept of autonomy and, subsequently, implement it in their daily practice.

## Author contributions

Research: Lima, A., Parola, V.

Formal Analysis: Lima, A., Martins, M., Parola, V.

Validation: Lima, A., Martins, M., Ferreira, M., Schoeller, S., Parola, V.

Writing – original draft: Lima, A., Martins, M.

Writing – review and editing: Lima, A., Martins, M., Ferreira, M., Schoeller, S., Parola, V.

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