

Phenomenology in nursing research: mapping of doctoral theses in Portugal

A presença da fenomenologia na investigação em enfermagem: mapeamento das teses de doutoramento em Portugal

La presencia de la fenomenología en la investigación en enfermería: mapeo de las tesis doctorales en Portugal

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Abstract

Background: Phenomenology has been gradually playing a more prominent role in nursing research at an international level.

Objective: To map and characterize nursing doctoral theses with a phenomenological methodological approach.

Methodology: Documentary research, with access to 273 doctoral theses completed between 2004 and 2018 and available in the open-access digital repositories of Portuguese universities.

Results: Twenty-six doctoral theses were identified whose research studies used a phenomenological methodological approach. The analysis took into account the following aspects: a) participants - mainly adults and clients of nursing care; b) healthcare area - most of the theses did not fit into a specific health area; c) context - mainly hospital; d) and research method - phenomenological hermeneutic.

Conclusion: Although still in small numbers, phenomenologically-oriented doctoral theses, by explaining the nature and meaning of lived experiences, become relevant to the development of the nursing discipline.

Keywords: nursing; qualitative research; hermeneutics; retrospective studies

Resumo

Enquadramento: A fenomenologia progressivamente tem conquistado, no contexto internacional, um espaço de destaque na investigação em enfermagem.

Objetivo: Mapear e caracterizar as teses de doutoramento em enfermagem de abordagem metodológica fenomenológica.

Metodologia: Investigação documental, com acesso a 273 teses de doutoramento, realizadas no período de 2004-2018, disponíveis nos repositórios digitais abertos das universidades portuguesas.

Resultados: Identificaram-se 26 teses de doutoramento com estudos de investigação de abordagem metodológica fenomenológica. A análise realizada teve em conta os seguintes aspetos: a) os participantes - maioritariamente adultos e clientes dos cuidados de enfermagem; b) a área de cuidados de saúde - a maioria das teses não se enquadra numa área de saúde específica; c) o contexto - primordialmente hospitalar; d) e o método usado - fenomenológico hermenêutico.

Conclusão: As teses de doutoramento, de orientação fenomenológica, embora ainda em percentagem reduzida, ao explicitarem a natureza e o significado da experiência vivida tornam-se relevantes para a construção disciplinar de enfermagem.

Palavras-chave: enfermagem; pesquisa qualitativa; hermenêutica; estudos retrospectivos

Resumen

Marco contextual: La fenomenología progresivamente ha conquistado, en el contexto internacional, un espacio de destaque en la investigación en enfermería.

Objetivo: Asignar e caracterizar las tesis de doctorado en enfermería de enfoque metodológico fenomenológico.

Metodología: Investigación documental, con acceso a 273 tesis de doctorado, llevadas a cabo desde 2004 hasta 2018, disponibles en los repositorios digitales abiertos de las universidades portuguesas.

Resultados: Se identificaron 26 tesis de doctorado con estudios de investigación de enfoque metodológico fenomenológico. El análisis realizado tuvo en cuenta los siguientes aspectos: a) los participantes - mayoritariamente adultos y clientes de los cuidados de enfermería; b) el área de cuidado de la salud - la mayoría de las tesis no se ajustan a un área de salud específica; c) el contexto - primordialmente hospitalario; d) y el método usado - fenomenológico hermenéutico.

Conclusión: Las tesis doctorales de orientación fenomenológica, aunque todavía en un pequeño porcentaje, al explicar la naturaleza y el significado de la experiencia vivida se vuelven relevantes para la construcción disciplinaria de la enfermería.

Palabras clave: enfermería; investigación cualitativa; hermenéutica; estudios retrospectivos

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Introduction

Phenomenology allows nursing, as a science, to investigate the inner world of human experience, accessing its personal meanings (Chesnay, 2015). The nature of this issue reinforces the need to focus research on human phenomena relevant to healthcare (Rodríguez, 2018). Phenomenology allows unveiling the human experience confined to a particular situation and shaped by a unique context where nurses, as researchers, are co-builders of a social reality that must be understood to be better taken care of. The phenomenological reflection produces knowledge about the core of human experience in the context of health sciences, promoting the humanization of healthcare (Rodríguez, 2018). The doctoral degree in nursing is an opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the quality of professional practice (Basto, 2016). The doctoral degree in nursing, as scientific training, aims to provide nurses with research skills to produce new knowledge for the nursing discipline. Thus, the ontological, epistemological, and methodological advances of the nursing discipline are directly dependent on the contributions of these researchers. The doctoral degree in nursing sciences was created in 2001 at the Institute of Biomedical Sciences Abel Salazar (ICBAS) - University of Porto. Since 2004, the University of Lisbon, in partnership with the Lisbon School of Nursing (ESEL), offers the Doctoral Program in Nursing and the Institute of Health Sciences of the Universidade Católica offers another Doctoral Program in Nursing. Then, the recent integration of the nursing discipline into the academy emerges as a privileged opportunity for transdisciplinary dialogue among different disciplines, being a promotor of the mutual reinforcement of scientific research. Phenomenology, as a research methodology, has been gradually playing a more prominent role in nursing at an international level (Chesnay, 2015; Matua, 2015; Moxham & Patterson, 2017), in such a way that a recent literature review of scientific articles published in European databases found that most of the qualitative studies in nursing used the phenomenological methodology (Richards, Hanssen, & Borglin, 2018). Therefore, it is important to understand the state of the art of nursing research that uses a phenomenological methodological approach

in Portugal. The objectives of this study were to map and characterize the nursing doctoral theses that used a phenomenological methodological approach.

Research question

Which scientific outputs use the phenomenological methodological approach in the nursing doctoral programs?

Background

The paradigm of qualitative research evokes a naturalistic approach to reality using different epistemological and methodological guidelines. Qualitative research in nursing seeks to understand and interpret personal experiences, interactions, and social contexts to find the meaning of human experience (Streubert & Carpenter, 2013). For this reason, the lived experience of a given phenomenon in the health-disease process provides an important basis for nursing care and throws light on healthcare in general. Phenomenology emerged from a German philosophical movement led by Husserl (1859-1938) and sought to unveil the primary source of direct intuition of the human being in relation to the essential elements of a given phenomenon (Husserl, 2008). The presence of phenomenology in nursing research became more central at the beginning of the 1990s (Chesnay, 2015). Historically-speaking, it is at this time that nursing researchers such as Diekelmann, Allen, and Munhall begin to conceptualize the adaptation of the methodology to the discipline, challenging nurses “to think phenomenologically” and “be phenomenological”, more than focusing on the procedural aspects of the phenomenological method (Nelms, 2015). Although there are a number of schools of phenomenology, phenomenology can be essentially descriptive, from an eidetic perspective, or interpretative, from a hermeneutic perspective (Chesnay, 2015). Descriptive phenomenology is mainly used to unveil the lived experience through a pure description of the intuition of essences (Beck, 2016). The phenomenon is what is revealed by itself, as an essence that reveals itself in an

intuition. Giorgi, an admittedly disciplinary phenomenologist, believed that the method, derived from philosophy, should be adapted to the different disciplines (Chesnay, 2015). On the other hand, interpretative phenomenology tends mainly to reaffirm the centrality of unveiling the lived experience through the interpretation of its meaning to the human being (Munhall, 2016). From this perspective, the researcher does not start out from the intuition of the consciousness, but rather from an understanding of a way of being-in-the-world. The two phenomenological movements (descriptive and interpretative) have coexisted over time, and several theorists have added new philosophical underpinnings and developed specific methods for data analysis (Munhall, 2016). A match between the topic under analysis and the methodology is essential in phenomenology (Chesnay, 2015; Rodriguez, 2018). For researchers, phenomenology proposes an inner dialogue between the research objectives, the philosophical perspective, and the method for data analysis, implying a harmonious path from the explanation of the purpose of the study to the description or interpretation of the lived experience. With regard to the scientific research outputs, doctoral theses are documents of recognized quality for having been subjected to scientific guidance, peer-review, and public discussion. Hence, the research studies on these documents provide an overview of the scientific outputs of the nursing discipline, in a given area and time period.

Methodology

Taking into account the research question and the study objectives, a documentary, retrospective, and descriptive search was performed covering the time period between 2004 and 2018 on 273 nursing doctoral theses available in the open-access digital repositories of the University of Lisbon (<https://repositorio.ul.pt>), the Universidade Católica Portuguesa

(<https://repositorio.ucp.pt>), and the University of Porto (<https://repositorio-aberto.up.pt>). The search was conducted between January and February 2019. Open-access institutional online repositories are a new way of disseminating and managing information, allowing access to scientific outputs (Preto, Martins, Brás, Pimentel, & Fernández-Sola, 2015). The theses were included if their authors designated the studies as having a phenomenological approach, with the other theses being excluded. According to the principles of this type of research, the researcher in the documentary analysis focuses on the contents of the documents and analyzes them in line with the research objectives (Júnior, Medeiros, & Augusta, 2017). The title and the abstract of each doctoral thesis were read to select those that answered the initial question. The selection was validated by all authors and the doubts arising from the analysis were discussed until consensus was reached. In this way, the search in the institutional digital repositories identified 26 theses that were subjected to a categorical descriptive quantitative analysis. The following categories were used in the analysis: participants, healthcare area, context, and research method (Richards et al., 2018). The keywords and study objectives of these theses were also analyzed.

Results

The doctoral theses with research studies using a phenomenological methodological approach corresponded to 10% of the total number of theses in Portugal, which is still a very small percentage. The annual distribution of theses has not been constant: five theses were defended in 2011 (Amorim; Apóstolo; Fabião; Teixeira; Pereira) and, in contrast, only one was completed in 2004 (Martins, 2004); in 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2017, two theses were completed in each year. It should be noted that 15 (57%) of these doctoral theses were completed in recent years, from 2014 to 2018 (Table 1).

Table 1

Identification of the doctoral theses with a phenomenological methodological approach

Author/ Year Title Thesis	Objective	Keywords	Institution
Martins, M. M. F. P. S. (2004). <i>O adulto doente e a família uma parceria de cuidados</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10216/64647	To understand the phenomenon of assistance from the perspective of patients and their relatives	No keywords	Universidade do Porto – Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar
Ramalho, A. A. (2009). <i>A experiência de sentir-se respeitada durante o trabalho de parto no hospital</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10451/1848	To understand the lived experience of feeling respected during labor	Nursing care; phenomenology; hospital; qualitative research; mother; respect; labor and delivery	Universidade de Lisboa
Mendes, I. M. M. M. D. (2009). <i>Ajustamento materno e paterno: Experiências vivenciadas pelos pais no pós-parto</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10216/7250	To understand the process of construction of the mothers' and fathers' adjustment to the post-partum period based on their lived experiences	No keywords	Universidade do Porto – Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar
Apóstolo, J. L. A. (2011). <i>O imaginário conduzido no conforto de doentes em contexto psiquiátrico</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10216/7157	To describe the experiences of “Comfort-discomfort” of psychiatric inpatients	No keywords	Universidade do Porto – Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar
Amorim, C. M. B. F. (2011). <i>Doença oncológica da mama: Vivências de mulheres mastectomizadas</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10216/7213	To identify women's representations of the word “cancer”; to understand the impact of the oncological diagnosis and mastectomy on women and their present situation after the disease process; to identify the family's perceptions about the disease.	No keywords	Universidade do Porto – Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar
Fabião, J. A. S. A. O. (2011). <i>Mães adolescentes: Percursos de vida</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10216/9172	To understand the experiences of adolescent mothers based on their perceptions of their life experiences, the impact on their life project, life journey, family relationships, and peer interactions.	No keywords	Universidade do Porto – Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar
Teixeira, M. J. R. (2011). <i>Necessidades de saúde em famílias com jovens adultos</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10216/24593	To understand the experiences of higher education students' families to determine their health needs.	No keywords	Universidade do Porto – Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar

Pereira, H. J. A. R. (2011). <i>Su-bitamente cuidadores informais: A experiência de transição para o papel de cuidador informal a partir de um evento inesperado</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10451/3916	To understand the lived experience of individuals taking on the role of informal caregivers after an unexpected event involving a relative.	Informal caregiving; lived experience; hermeneutic phenomenology; nursing	Universidade de Lisboa
Lopes, J. M. O. (2012). <i>Ser cuidado por um enfermeiro gestor de caso: A experiência vivida da pessoa com problemas de adição</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10451/7296	To understand the lived experience of being taken cared for by a case manager nurse of the person addicted to psychoactive substances who is a client of the Treatment Team from the Public Institute of Drug and Addiction	Person with addiction problems; treatment; nursing; case management; lived experience	Universidade de Lisboa
Fernandes, I. M. R. (2012). <i>Quando o enfermeiro se torna doente: Acedendo à experiência vivida</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10451/7423	To understand the meaning of the lived experience of being ill from the individual perspective of the caregiver, the nurse	Nurses; lived experience of illness; phenomenology; nursing	Universidade de Lisboa
Coelho, J. C. Q. (2013). <i>Sofrimento e espiritualidade da pessoa com esclerose múltipla</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10400.14/10570	To study the experience of suffering and spirituality of individuals with multiple sclerosis and the resources they use to cope with illness and suffering	No keywords	Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Instituto Ciências da Saúde
Mendes, A. G. P. (2013). <i>Desalojar o Desassossego que vive em si: A necessidade de informação da família na unidade de cuidados intensivos</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://bibliografia.bnportugal.gov.pt/bnp/bnp.exe/registo?1919063	To understand the meaning of information from the perspective of relatives of adults admitted to an ICU	Family; information; intensive care unit; lived experience; nursing	Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Instituto Ciências da Saúde
Nobre, C. F. C. (2014). <i>A experiência da pessoa com dor crónica do foro oncológico: Um estudo fenomenológico</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10400.14/14638	To understand how a person experiences chronic oncological pain	Chronic pain; oncological disease; patient; nurses	Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Instituto Ciências da Saúde
Santiago, M. D. S. (2014). <i>Vivência afetiva em enfermagem</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10400.14/14960	Conceptual clarification of the question of affectivity in human behavior in the area of nursing care	Human affectivity; interpersonal relations; nursing care; ethics nursing	Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Instituto Ciências da Saúde
Henriques, H. M. S. R. (2015). <i>Experiência do autocuidado e identidade pessoal: Um estudo fenomenológico com pessoas idosas que vivem com doença pulmonar obstrutiva crónica</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10400.14/18573	To understand how the elderly living with COPD in their own home are affected by the experience of self-care in their personal identity and to put in perspective congruent holistic nursing care	Self-care; personal identity; elderly; COPD; phenomenology; nursing	Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Instituto Ciências da Saúde

Ramos, S. E. B. (2015). <i>Perder um irmão até à adolescência: A experiência e o significado na vida adulta</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10400.14/26057	To describe the experience of losing a sibling in childhood or adolescence, its meaning in adult life and to identify the impact on healthcare provision, namely for nursing. To understand the lived experience as a focus of attention for health and nursing	Child; adolescent; grief; sibling bereavement; nursing	Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Instituto Ciências da Saúde
Rebello, M. T. S. (2015). <i>O O regresso à vida quotidiana após experiência de uma situação-limite</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10451/18023	To understand the lived experience of the return to the everyday life of adults faced with a limit-situation	Limit-situation; lives experience; nursing; return to everyday life	Universidade de Lisboa
Pereira, P. S. (2015). <i>O amor na relação terapêutica em enfermagem: Experiência vivida do enfermeiro de saúde mental</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10451/20503	To understand the lived experience of love by mental health nurses in the therapeutic relationship in nursing	Love; therapeutic relationship; nursing; mental health nursing; phenomenology of practice	Universidade de Lisboa
Lopes, F. M. B. A. (2016). <i>O ambiente hospitalar nos cuidados de enfermagem</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10400.14/20107	To identify the significant structure of the concept environment in nursing and understand the phenomenon of the hospital environment in nursing care	Nursing; environment; management; patients	Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Instituto Ciências da Saúde
Castro, C. M. C. S. P. (2016). <i>O internamento numa unidade de cuidados intensivos: A experiência vivida da pessoa em situação crítica</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10400.14/21609	To explore the lived experience of the person in critical condition during their stay in an ICU	Person in critical condition; intensive care unit; phenomenology; lived experience; nursing	Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Instituto Ciências da Saúde
Rodrigues, S. M. C. (2016). <i>Determinantes e vivências na transição para a parentalidade, em idade reprodutiva tardia, em mães pela primeira vez</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10216/100586	To understand the experiences and the biopsychosocial determinants involving motherhood in late reproductive age in first-time mothers	Pregnancy late in life; late motherhood; transition to motherhood and parenting; nursing care	Universidade do Porto – Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar
Magão, M. T. (2017). <i>A esperança em ação: A experiência da esperança em pais de crianças com doença crónica</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://repositorio.ul.pt/handle/10451/40069	To understand the lived experience of hope among parents of children with chronic illness.	Hope; chronic illness; parents; children; nursing; lived experience	Universidade de Lisboa
Baptista, R. C. N. (2017). <i>Simulação de alta-fidelidade no ensino de enfermagem: Satisfação e ganhos percebidos pelos estudantes</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10216/105288	To analyze nursing undergraduate students' experiences of their participation in clinical experiences using high-fidelity simulation (HFS)	High-fidelity simulation; nursing education; student; satisfaction; gains	Universidade do Porto – Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar

Marques, M. A. A. (2018). <i>Solitude e sofrimento em pessoas maiores de 80 anos</i> . (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from https://repositorio.ucp.pt/handle/10400.14/27702	To identify the dimensions of solitude experienced by individuals aged over 80 years who live alone	Person over the age of 80; solitude; suffering	Universidade do Porto – Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas Abel Salazar
Henriques, C. M. G. (2018). <i>Transição para o papel maternal: A experiência vivida de mulheres com problemas de adição a substâncias psicoativas</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10451/33134	To understand the lived experience of the transition to the maternal role of women with problems of addiction to psychoactive substances, from pregnancy to the first year of life of the child.	Transition; maternity; living experience; addiction; phenomenology; nursing.	Universidade de Lisboa
Sousa, M. F. A. (2018). <i>Experiência vivida dos adolescentes com cardiopatia congênita: Uma abordagem fenomenológica</i> (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/10451/36930	To understand the lived experience of adolescents with congenital health disease according to their perspectives and describe the lived experience of adolescents with congenital heart disease.	Nursing; adolescent; congenital heart disease; lived experience	Universidade de Lisboa

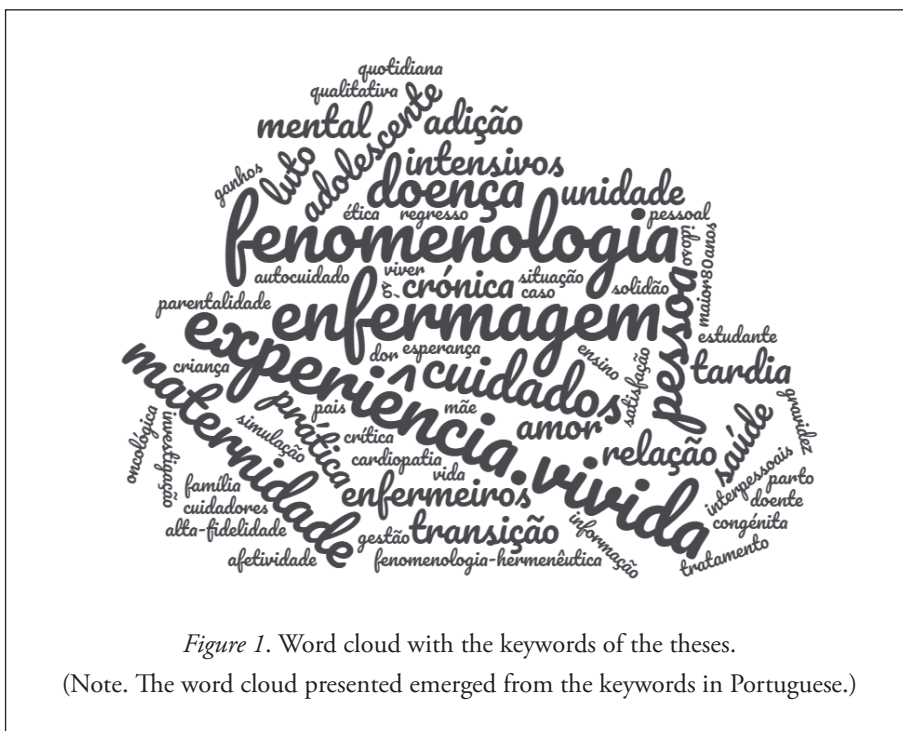
The participants in these studies were mostly adults (19-64 years), which corresponded to 61.5% of the theses. However, seven theses had adult and elderly participants (Amorim, 2011; Castro, 2016; Coelho, 2013; Lopes, 2016; Nobre, 2014; Martins, 2004; Pereira, 2011), two theses only had elderly participants (Henriques, 2015; Marques, 2018), and one thesis had adolescent participants (Fabião, 2011). The number of participants varied between three (Rebelo, 2015) and 92 participants (Amorim, 2011), with the following measures of central tendency: $\bar{X}=21$, $M_o=10$; $M_e=16$. Most of the participants in these studies were clients of nursing care (85%), but also nurses (Fernandes, 2012; Pereira, 2015; Santiago, 2014) and participants who were both clients and nurses (Lopes, 2016).

In the majority of these theses, the healthcare area referred to another category because they did not fit into the established health areas (Richards et al., 2018). Despite this, the search identified some theses in the following areas: reproductive health (Fabião, 2011; Henriques, 2018; Mendes, 2009; Ramalho, 2009; Rodrigues, 2016), mental (Apóstolo, 2011; Lopes,

2012; Pereira, 2015), oncological (Amorim, 2011; Nobre, 2014), neurological (Coelho, 2013), congenital (Sousa, 2018), and respiratory (Henriques, 2015).

The predominant context of care in these studies was the hospital context (42%), including inpatient services, outpatient consultations, and day hospital. Six theses were conducted in the community context (Henriques, 2015; Lopes, 2012; Marques, 2018; Mendes, 2009; Pereira, 2011; Ramos, 2015). With regard to other contexts, it should be noted that two studies were developed in nursing schools (Baptista, 2017; Teixeira, 2011).

In order to illustrate the topics that are closely related to the healthcare area and the context of these theses with a phenomenological methodological approach, a word cloud was created using their keywords (Figure 1). The analysis of the keywords emerged from the keywords in portuguese. The word cloud shows the centrality of the concepts of *phenomenology*, *nursing*, and *lived experience*. The concepts of *illness*, *care*, *person*, and *maternity* were also very common among the keywords of the theses with a phenomenological methodological approach.

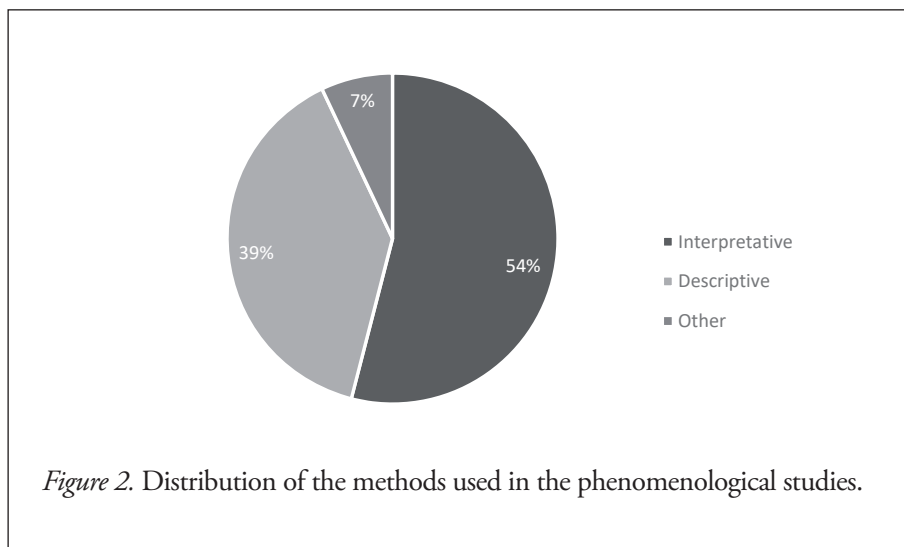


In a more detailed analysis of the study objectives of these theses, the results showed that the objective of more than half of the studies (54%) was to access the participants' lived experience (Castro, 2016; Fabião, 2011; Fernandes, 2012; Henriques, 2018; Lopes, 2012; Magão, 2017; Mendes, 2009; Mendes, 2014; Pereira, 2011; Pereira, 2015; Ramalho, 2009; Ramos, 2015; Rebelo, 2015; Sousa, 2018), which is consistent with the results of the word cloud of keywords whose central concept is *lived experience*.

The analyzed doctoral theses were primary studies with a qualitative approach. Of the total number of theses, two of them used mixed studies, in which the qualitative study used a phenomenological methodological approach (Amorim, 2011; Coelho, 2013). Four theses used a multi-study approach, in which the

phenomenological study was usually the first study (Apóstolo, 2011; Rodrigues, 2016) or the second study (Baptista, 2017; Martins, 2004) in order to further understand the phenomenon at an initial phase of research.

The main philosophical perspective in the studies was the interpretative or hermeneutic phenomenology (Figure 2), with an emphasis on van Manen (Amorim, 2011; Mendes, 2014; Pereira, 2011; Pereira, 2015; Santiago, 2014; Sousa, 2018). The studies with a descriptive phenomenological approach focused mainly on the work by Giorgi (Baptista, 2017; Castro, 2016; Fernandes, 2012; Mendes, 2009; Ramalho, 2009; Rodrigues, 2016). The "other" category ($n=7\%$) corresponded to theses using other phenomenological perspectives, such as the existential and transcendental phenomenology.



The phenomenological studies in these theses are based on different philosophical perspectives of theorists of several schools of phenomenology.

Discussion

In the universe of doctoral theses in Portugal, the presence of studies with a phenomenological methodological approach is low (10%), and most of them were completed in the past four years (from 2014 to 2018). The analysis refers to the theses identified by the authors; however, there may be other theses that are not available in online repositories. Even so, it should be noted that in a study on nursing theses conducted in Brazil, between 2003 and 2013, the authors identified only about 2% of phenomenological studies (Esquivel et al., 2016).

In a phenomenological study, the number of participants is usually small because the researcher tries to select participants with very specific characteristics (Chesnay, 2015), that is, people who have experienced a given phenomenon of interest. The most common sample size in these studies is 10 participants, which is consistent and expected given the usual small number of participants in phenomenological studies. Participants are mostly adults as can be observed in the literature review of European nursing research (Richards et al., 2018). The findings of this study also show that the clients of nursing care are the main focus of research and, hence,

high-quality qualitative research emerges as a source of socially significant knowledge (Egry & Fonseca, 2016).

The majority of the theses do not fall into a specific health area because most of the studies focus on phenomena associated with the experience of the health-disease process, such as grief, chronic illness, hospitalization, solitude, and the transition to the caregiver's role, without focusing solely on a specific health area. However, within the identified health areas, the area of reproductive health was the most frequent, associated with the various transitions experienced by the person and the family during this process, which is consistent with the results of other studies (Esquivel et al., 2016; Richards et al., 2018). The aim of phenomenology is to contribute to a greater understanding of the nature and meaning of the lived experience (van Manen, 2014), thus this phase of the life-cycle of the individual and the family is associated with unique experiences, such as pregnancy, postpartum period, and transition to parenthood.

With regard to the areas of nursing specialization in Portugal, the theses fell into the areas of medical-surgical nursing (Amorim, 2011; Castro, 2016; Coelho, 2013; Henriques, 2015; Mendes, 2014; Nobre, 2014), maternal health and obstetric nursing (Fabião, 2011; Henriques, 2018; Mendes, 2009; Ramalho, 2009; Rodrigues, 2016), mental health and psychiatric nursing (Apóstolo, 2011; Lopes, 2012; Pereira, 2015), child health and pediatric

nursing (Magão, 2017; Ramos, 2015; Sousa, 2018), and community nursing (Marques, 2018; Pereira, 2011). This reclassification (Pretto, Martins, Brás, Pimentel, & Fernández-Sola, 2015) allows concluding on the prevalence of the area of medical-surgical nursing, with the studies contributing to a better understanding of phenomena associated with the experience of adults and older people with chronic and disabling diseases, such as degenerative diseases and cancer.

The most prevalent context was the hospital setting, which is also in line with the findings of the literature review on European nursing research (Richards et al., 2018); however, it should be noted that two studies were conducted in academic context (Baptista, 2017; Teixeira, 2011) and that the participants were nursing students. The development of phenomenological research in the academic context reflects the faculty's interest in better understanding the students' lived experience of their pedagogical processes.

The concept of *lived experience*, which is key in a phenomenological study, was found in the objectives of the research itself (54%). In the remaining 46% of the studies, phenomenology was present mainly as a methodological option. One of the aspects that makes a phenomenological study, in its essence, is the profound articulation in the methodology of the concepts present in the investigated phenomenon (Norlyk & Harder, 2010).

The interpretative or hermeneutic phenomenological perspective was also identified as prevalent in another study (Esquivel et al., 2016). The findings demonstrate that the most common author within this perspective is van Manen; however, in that study, Heidegger was the most prevalent author within the hermeneutic perspective (Esquivel et al., 2016). Descriptive and hermeneutic approaches to phenomenology are distinct and require researchers to use specific philosophical lenses in their research (Chesnay, 2015; Norlyk & Harder, 2010). The quality of qualitative research in nursing is required to ensure the rigor, credibility, and human value of scientific research (Egry & Fonseca, 2016). It is, therefore, crucial in phenomenological research of excellence to clarify both the philosophical perspective and the phenomenological method used by the researchers.

The presence of the phenomenological approach in mixed and multi-study research was an unexpected result, corresponding to approximately one-fourth of the total number of theses (23%), which demonstrates the innovation in the research conducted in Portugal using the phenomenological methodology. Therefore, this study provided a greater understanding of the researchers' methodological options to reach the study objective, allowing us to trace an academic path in the search for the lived experience.

Conclusion

In Portugal, the phenomenological studies in the nursing doctoral theses are still a very small percentage (10% of the studies); however, the majority of these theses were completed in recent years (from 2014 to 2018). The main limitation of this study is that the search was restricted to doctoral theses, which does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of the remaining nursing research outputs. In relation to the objectives, most of the theses aim to unveil the lived experience of a given phenomenon, mainly through interpretative phenomenology, using mostly adult participants and clients of nursing care, in hospital settings, and in the specific area of medical-surgical nursing. These theses expand the horizon of human phenomena such as solitude, hope, limit-situation, suffering, spirituality, respect, and love, thus more attention should be directed toward those studies that have an impact on daily clinical practice. In Portugal, the consolidation of the knowledge produced by the phenomenological studies in the nursing doctoral theses lies in a reflexive identity that still requires maturity to be molded. The enhancement of the knowledge produced by phenomenology focuses on the uniqueness of each care intervention that is developed and further explored in that specific context. Studies such as this one also stimulate the discussion among peers, opening the horizons for young nursing researchers to include the phenomenological methodology in the scientific outputs of their bachelor and master's degrees in nursing and to consider new areas of action for nursing while giving visibility to nurses' lived experience.

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