

Original Article

## A Hermeneutic Concept Analysis of Serving – A Challenging Concept for Nursing Administrations

**Leena Honkavuo, PhD, RDN, RN, CM, RNT**

Department of Caring Science. Division for Social Sciences, University of Abo Akademi, Finland

**Kerstin Sivonen, PhD, RN**

Senior Lecturer emerita, Department of Caring Science. Division for Social Sciences, University of Abo Akademi, Finland

**Katie Eriksson, PhD, RN**

Professor emerita, Department of Caring Science. Division for Social Sciences, University of Abo Akademi, Finland

**Dagfinn Naden, RN**

Professor, Faculty of Health. Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

**Correspondence:** Dr. Leena Honkavuo, University of Abo Akademy, Department of Caring Science. Division for Social Sciences PB 311, 65101 Vasa, Finland Email: honkavuo@hotmail.com

### Abstract

**Background:** The concept (to) serve has been used in nursing administrations since Florence Nightingale, but the development of knowledge in caring science and a clear and current meaning of the concept need to be more recognized.

**Aim:** The overall aim is to, from a caring science perspective and through a hermeneutic approach, deepen the understanding of the meanings of the concept serve and provide a formatted understanding of serving in nursing administrations. The aim is to analyse the meaning of the concept serve in the Swedish language and describe a semantic investigation of the concept. The aim is further to deepen the essence of knowledge in nursing administration in the linguistic map of caring science.

**Methods:** The semantic analysis strategy has been applied according to Peep Koort's thinking and theoretical model and later developed by Katie Eriksson towards a hermeneutic concept analysis. Etymological dictionaries, Swedish dictionaries from 1850 to 2008, dictionaries in other languages, dictionaries from medieval Swedish language and medieval Latin were used for describing the concept of serve.

**Results:** According to hermeneutical thinking, it is possible to understand being through concepts and language since they are connected. This is a universal ontological construction and fundamental to understand the nature of the concept serve. The results show that this concept is essential in nursing administrations for the reason that it describes what serve and serving is in the context of nursing leadership.

**Conclusion:** The concept of serve has developed towards an unclear and unarticulated meaning and perception in the modern Swedish language. To serve and serving gives the inner core and the deepest meaning for nursing, nursing administration and caring science.

**Keywords:** Caring science, concept analysis, hermeneutics, nursing administration, nursing leadership, serve.

## Introduction

In the Swedish language the concept *serve* is a challenging concept as it is an emotively charged word in itself. It appears as though the concept in modern times has transformed into an obsolete and vague expression that has lost its ethical and moral value, not just in healthcare organizations, but also in Nordic societies at large.

Concept analysis is conducted in human sciences to open up the understanding of the research field, lead to the precision of concepts and the object of study, and perhaps influence the results of the research or create new theories (Koort, 1975). Semantic analyses are significant in caring science terminology and nursing research in general. Concept analysis contributes to the further clarification of the position of synonyms in the linguistic map of caring science and may further develop caring science, nursing administration, nurses' training and nursing research (Eriksson, 1997). Semantic investigations of core concepts enable the identification and clarification of fundamental concepts in the course of the research process and allow other researchers in the research environment to understand and guarantee what the research expresses. The transfer of concepts between different scientific fields can lead to lack of clarity and require re-determination in each new context (Koort, 1975).

The concept *serve* has received only scant attention within national and international nursing research and from different perspectives. Many healthcare organizations formulate their nursing administrations as value-based, ethical and as serving the patient, but there is no unified description of what serving is. 'Serving' as an old concept has disappeared from the vocabulary of the reality of modern healthcare, even though serving is understood as a core concept in caring science (Honkavuo, 2014). The concept *serve* is primarily related to acts where the intention is to promote health and alleviate suffering or to serve something with the help of something else. The devaluation of the use of the concept includes a form of banning, condemnation and defense. Serving has roots in the mediaeval Lutheran view of women as humble servants. Luther's notion of serving is characterized by a calling to serve God, something that may indicate the human being's mysterious and transcendental dimension (Rasmussen, 2004). Naturally, this may lead to that in healthcare organizations today serving as a

concept is experienced to be controversial, offensive or derogatory.

Caring science research tradition from Åbo Akademi University in Finland forms the theoretical perspectives basic structure and the search of knowledge in this study. Parts of the theoretical perspective constructs' our preunderstanding. The interpretative belongings of hermeneutic interpretation within caring science and the language universities of truthfulness refer to the study's quality criteria. The question *what is serving* opens up for a semantic investigation of the concept, its synonyms and meanings. Our point of departure in this study is that the concept provides the ethical foundation for the nurse leader's ethos and position, and is a motive for nursing administrations. A clear formulation of the healthcare organisational values that govern nursing administrations influence nurse leaders' serving and ethical value base and their patientcentred and clinical work of caring. We mean that ethos expresses the ethics of caring, the inner harmony and willingness of desires in what opens up to the truthful, the good and the beautiful in service, nursing leadership and nursing administration (Eriksson, 2003; Lévinas 1996). The aim of this study is to determine the meaning of the concept *serve* in the Swedish language through a semantic analysis and to describe how the characteristics of the concept can be highlighted in nursing administrations. The study's research question is as follow: What is serving in nursing administration?

## Methodology

The building blocks of science consist of concepts, definitions, terms and language. The language is our tool with which we can interpret and understand the world (Gadamer, 2004). In caring science, concept analysis is a useful method for clarifying a concept and its development when the concept is known so that it is possible to attain knowledge about its different contours. Concept analysis involves a search for the nuances, variations, and features, as well as the specification and investigation, of a concept across linguistic occurrences or phenomena hidden behind the symbolic meanings of a concept (Koort, 1975; Sivonen, et al. 2010; Eriksson, 2010). In our study, we open up the concept analysis of the related terms of the concept *serve* enabling the development of a new caring science understanding.

The concept analysis draws on Peep Koort's semantic strategy of analysis outlined in the 1970s and it consists of an etymological analysis, a semantic analysis and a discrimination analysis. According to Koort, semantic analysis is an interpretative science where the object of study is the relationship between the linguistic and the meaning, significance and reference of language. Semantic analyses are studies of the meaning of linguistic expressions or symbols, words and terms (Koort, 1975; Sivonen, et al. 2010). Koort further developed the theory in collaboration with Katie Eriksson. Eriksson's hermeneutical model of concept analysis is substance oriented in caring science basic research (Eriksson, 1997; Sivonen, et al. 2010; Eriksson 2010). This methodology is dialectic in nature and emphasizes a continuous hermeneutic whole-parts movement. The purpose of the analysis is to determine the essence and meaning content of the concept and to draw attention to its philosophical origins so that it is possible to describe the meaning content in a general way (Eriksson 2010; Sivonen, 2000).

The model for concept analysis is used as an opening thought structure to capture the conceptual depth and core of the concept serving. The data collection was conducted by using a hypothetic-deductive method while the analysis and interpretation of the results represent a hermeneutic interpretation. The concept analysis was conducted in Swedish. The use of the mother tongue represents an ethical course of action toward the concept under study and contributes to increasing the validity of the study when interpreting the results. Yet, our interest lies in publishing this article in English because we wish to convey current semantic knowledge of the concept to an international readership. We have chosen to use a professional translator for the article to further ensure its validity.

Etymological analysis means exploring the genesis or original meaning and metamorphosis, that is, the transformation of the concept serve. The most important etymological sources for analyses and meanings are etymological dictionaries (Koort, 1975). We have investigated the genesis and metamorphosis of serving from medieval Latin as we assume that the genesis of the concept may open up for a new and deepened understanding. The meaning of the concept can change with time and there are no guarantees that the original, historical meanings and substance remain and exist in today's language use (Koort,

1975). This metamorphosis may emerge in connection with the lexical investigation of the vocabulary meanings of the concept serve.

The semantic analysis involves the examination of different dictionaries and synonym dictionaries to obtain knowledge about whether different linguists agree on the concept under study. According to Koort (1975), it is possible to label the semantic analysis as a meaning analysis because the semantic analysis is an analysis of the meaning of the linguistic expressions or symbols. If the examination of the dictionaries shows that the authors agree on the synonymy of the concept the semantic analysis is completed. If not, the next step in the semantic analysis is to conduct a discrimination analysis (Koort, 1975; Sivonen, et al. 2010).

A discrimination analysis explores closely related concepts. These closely related concepts are analyzed to identify features and discriminative features for the concept serve. The discriminatory paradigm forms clusters or groups of related concepts where meanings are related to each other through their substantial meaning content and degree of synonymy. The clusters emerge as a result of having qualitatively different meanings and partly representing a quantitative measurement through different degrees of synonymy on which to base this study's semantic interpretations. The implementation is divided into a matrix phase, a paradigm phase, and an interpretive phase (Koort, 1975; Sivonen, et al. 2010).

The matrix phase summarizes the synonymy in the dictionaries in the discrimination phase. The paradigm phase means that the different synonyms in the family of the concept are positioned in relation to each other in a discriminatory paradigm. The synonyms represent a platform for inner meaning that comprises the meaning dimensions of serve while they also constitute the ideal and praxis concepts of the discriminatory paradigm (Eriksson, 1997; Sivonen, et al. 2010; Eriksson 2010). These two, the ideal and praxis concepts, are necessarily determined from an ontological and contextual perspective. They enable the discovery of the innermost knowledge pattern in the concept serving, offer a deeper understanding of nursing administration and develop the field of caring science.

In the hermeneutic interpretation phase the concept serve was explored in relation to the

matrix phase and the paradigm phase, and it was established that the hermeneutic interpretation of the concept would not have been possible to present solely through implementing the first phase of the method. The different phases are etymologically connected and tied to each other and this connection is rooted in the related vocabulary of serving.

### Selection of dictionaries

Etymological and Swedish dictionaries were consulted, published during 1850–2008. The etymology was analyzed by using four etymological dictionaries. The genesis and metamorphosis of the concept serve were analyzed from the medieval Swedish language.

In the semantic analysis, synonymy is analyzed by means of fifteen dictionaries and compiled in the table of synonyms for the concept serve. Scientific authority guided the selection of dictionaries. The ambition was to select dictionaries with even time intervals to convey the most truthful and the best possible complete description of the concepts' meaning content (Koort, 1975). In this article we present in the table of synonyms only the features or synonyms that are most relevant for our study. The concepts

that are not mentioned can be found from the etymological analysis in the presentation of results.

Using synonym dictionaries and defined scientific dictionaries enable a deeper understanding of the meaning of the concepts. A selection of dictionaries is only partly fulfilled. The dictionaries have different editors and authors and they have been published with different publishers. A dilemma in the study was that several authors have contributed to the creation of many dictionaries. Newer, revised and expanded dictionaries are often published by the same author.

According to Koort (1975), authoritative dictionaries that are published each decade should be chosen. This requirement is fulfilled in the present study, which means that saturation is reached. It is, however, significant to observe that a reduced number of dictionaries were published during the first half of the twentieth century in the Nordic countries. This time period creates a gap in the printing and publishing work. The cause for this is thought to be wartime and the rebuilding of the Nordic societies – a time when dictionaries received less attention.

**Table 1. Synonym table for the concept serve.**

SERVE  (*Older spellignform of the concept)	Dalin 1850/1853*	Dalin 1895	Dalin 1964	Östergren 1964	Strömberg 1975	Palmér & Friedländer 1977	Malmström, Györki & Sjögren 1981	Allén 1986 (35)	Malmström, Györki & Sjögren 1991	Walter 1991	Friedländer 1992	Allén 1996	Strömberg 1998	Malmström, Györki & Sjögren 2004	SAOB 2008	Summa	Number of dictionaries
	Use	x				x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	11
Work					x		x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	9	15
Assist		x	x	x	x	x			x		x	x	x	x	x	11	15
Function				x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	10	15
Deserve	x			x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	12	15
Benefit	x	x	x	x	x	x				x	x		x		x	10	15
Help		x	x	x	x	x				x	x		x		x	9	15
Attend	x	x	x	x	x	x		x			x	x	x		x	11	15

### Results

The different phases of the hermeneutic concept analysis is presented here: The etymological

analysis provides verbs that open for further investigation and interpretation of the concept serving.

### Etymological analysis of the genesis and linguistic metamorphosis of the concept serve

The concept serve originates from the Old Swedish, the Icelandic, the Danish and the German languages (Lindestam & Thiel, 1994). The concept derives from the following: *being one's slave, being subordinate to another and obliged to work or assist this person, be in a dependent relationship against a conditioned salary; further another's gain or profit; assist, help, deserve, be to another's advantage, useful; to boot.* (Dalin, 1850; 1853; 1895; 1964). The origin of the concept is also found in: *a form of public official, runner who runs errands.* The concept serve relates in the Old Swedish to *politeness, address and greeting* (Hellquist, 1922; 1966; 1980). The concept corresponds to Norwegian language. Serve is related to the prefixes in *humbleness*, whose real meaning Wéssen (1966; 1997) relates to *servant, serf and serving spirit.*

Söderwall (1884–1918) refers to older evidence for the Old Swedish spelling, which originates in 1516: *be a servant, serve God or saints, devote oneself to service or worship, worship, help, aid, be of service, be useful, benefit, help, deserve, be deserving of and serve someone with something.* According to Odelman (1987), the concept serve is translated from mediaeval Latin in 1291 into *minister*. The concept *minister* is related to *servant, steward, assistant, clergyman, altar servant, altar priest, deacon, church servant, clerk, general minister and provincial minister.*

### Interpretation of the meaning of the concept serve in other languages

The meanings of serve in other languages are often described as definitions of the different contexts of the concept. The Swedish-English dictionary gives it three fields of meaning: *serve, earn money and make* (Petti, et al. 2001). The concept *serve* has, according a number of different fields of meaning: *serve, be of service, help, cater, put out, attend to, serve), nurse, provide, provide for, be good enough for, be suitable, suit, be of help, fulfil, treat, serve, cover, act, work, admit, work, be ministrant in the divine service, function, be dedicated, be favourable to* (Hellquist, 1922; 1966; 1980). *The Oxford English Dictionary* relates the dimensions of meaning to practical work: *To be a servant (to), render service (to). To be a subordinate, serviceable, or useful (to); to answer a purpose. To minister to a person at table; hence to supply,*

*furnish, present with (a commodity). To treat in a specified manner. Technical senses (with various const.)* (Simpson & Weiner, 1989).

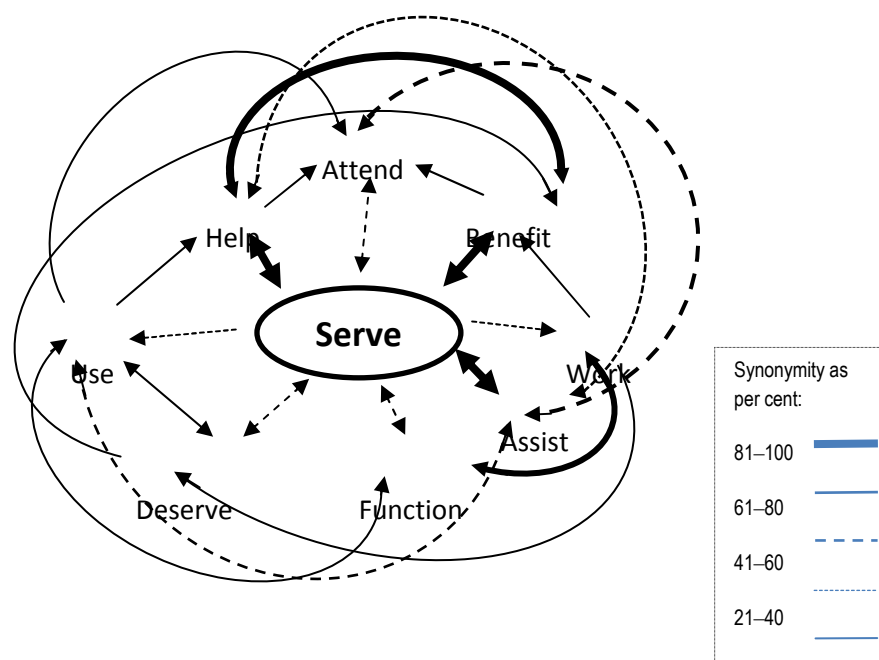
Serve has two meaning dimensions in German: *deserve* and *be deserving of*. Further, the German-Swedish dictionary offers three Swedish fields of meaning for the concept: *favour, promote, serve, be of good use to someone, be used as something, serve a good purpose, do one's military service* as well as *take the long way and work one's way up* (Petti, et al. 2004). The Swedish-German dictionary (Norstedts, 1989) relates the concept to *do someone a favour, deserve, be an adviser and earn money*. The Latin-Swedish dictionary relates the concept to *minister* and *ministro*. The concept is presented according to a more modern meaning in contrast to medieval Latin. *Ministro* originates in *serve, attend, lay the table, serviceably proffer, supply, procure, bestow, nurse, perform and attend to* (Ahlberg, et al. 2004).

### Interpretation phase of the matrix and discriminatory paradigm

The semantic analysis comprises a time period of almost 160 years. The table of synonyms shows that the concept serve has different semantic qualities (Table 1). The investigation of dictionaries shows that the definition and articulation of the concept serve are complicated and the authors of the dictionaries seem to disagree about its content. This means that a discrimination analysis with the already mentioned synonyms needs to be conducted. Based on the aim of the study we include three meaning-bearing synonyms from the table of synonyms in the discrimination analysis: *work, function* and *help*. The discrimination analysis begins with a discriminatory matrix that presents the connections and directions of the synonyms to the concept serve (Table 2.) and continues towards a discriminatory paradigm (Figure 1.). The concept serve refers to *concrete and practical tasks* through its relationship to the concepts *help, serve* and *diacony*. The same is true of the meaning dimension as *a way of greeting*. According to the table of synonyms, serve did not experience larger dislocations of meaning during the time period 1850–2008. A corresponding conclusion can be drawn when exploring medieval dictionaries. The concepts *benefit* and *attend* appear to remain relatively unchanged.

**Table 2. Discriminatory matrix for serve based on 15 dictionaires.**

	Serve	Use	Work	Service	Function	Deserve	Benefit	Help	Attend	Number of dictionaires
Serve	XX	11	9	11	10	12	10	9	11	15
Use		XX		8				3	2	15
Work		3	XX		6	1				15
Service	7	7		XX				5	5	14
Function	3	1	12		XX					13
Deserve	6		1			XX	1			15
Benefit	8	3		2		1	XX			14
Help	6			2			10	XX		14
Attend	3			9				1	XX	15



**Figure 1. Discriminatory paradigm for the concept serve.** The correlations and connections of the synonyms are visualized through the use of arrows and different lines. They present the degree or strength of synonymy and whether the relationship of synonyms is one-way, two-way or mutual. Discovering how the families of concepts create clusters is the leading thought behind discrimination analyses. The mutual synonymy of the concept is calculated according to Koort’s (1975) formula of synonymy and the interpretation, which opens up for the field of meaning, is compiled in the form of the discriminatory paradigm. Synonymy is repeatedly calculated for each chosen synonym as follows: the number of existing connections times 100, divided by the number of possible connections. The synonym calculations are presented in percentages. The calculations result in the following degrees of synonymy and relationships of synonyms: Serve has a one-way relationship to use, a one-way relationship to work, a strong, a two-way and mutual relationship with function, a strong, two-way and mutual relationship with deserve, a strong two-way and mutual relationship with benefit, a two-way and mutual relationship with help and a two-way and mutual relationship with attend.

to the creation of knowledge in nursing administration.

The review of existing caring science knowledge on concept analysis confirms the assumption that the semantic meanings of the concept serve have not been investigated through concept analyses. The analysis of the meanings of the concept cannot be seen as an absolute or complete occurrence. The concept analysis offers caring science a deepened understanding of nursing leadership and nursing administration and a number of meaning-bearing conceptual illustrations and qualities. It also elucidates the general societal significance, function and relationship of the concept.

The concept analysis shows that the concept serve is a core lexeme in the context of nursing administration because the analysis opens up and contributes to the description of what serving is. An opening for new or different horizons of understanding the question *what is serving* in relation to nursing leadership and the meaning context of caring can be seen from the discrimination analysis. We have looked at the synonymy and meanings of the concept serve and responded to the question in the following way: the understanding that the concept help exemplifies reflects what is operative in nursing leadership. It comprises the interpretation to help and is the infinite, evident, natural and original principle of serving. In this meaning dimension is found the basis for practical awareness and theoretical reflections in nursing leadership learning. Help can indicate the starting-point for nursing leadership and the core of the good, the truthful and beautiful in the meaning context of caring. The nurse's inner dedication of the ethos of caring, the ethics of caring and the willingness to help is interpreted as rooted in the connected harmonious functions of serving.

The use of the concept use can be seen as the nurse leader's responsibility and sacrifice in nursing administrations. The concept use makes topical the possibility to find the meeting-place of serving in nursing administration as the nurse leader can open and turn to the other and offer a space for different expectations, values and realities. The semantic investigation sheds light on the important meaning of serving as responsibility. Responsibility highlights the ethos and mission of the nurse leader in a nursing administration. Responsibility is central in Luther's and Lévinas's philosophies. It is the face

of the other that creates ethics, says Lévinas (1996), and he forges a link between responsibility and ethics that takes place in the presence of the other, face to face. The concept is not explicitly visualized, but is implicitly present in this study because responsibility is linked to nursing leadership and nursing administration.

The concept work permeates the practical dynamic in nursing leadership. Its historical origins can be found in the calling and diaconal mission to serve in respect and dignity. The functions of work are braided into the nurse leader's nursing administration responsibility, normative ethical and moral acts as well as the development and creation of serving, tending caring cultures. Serving creates the core of truth for the primary ethical and moral basic task of nursing administration. In the etymological analysis *serve* refers to the synonym *minister* and *ministerium*. This means that *serve* is expressed through an *ad-ministration* in the service of caring science for the well-being of the human being. Through etymology and its unique combination of the different synonyms of the concept serve – work, benefit, *ministerium* and deacon – we can establish that it suits the modern human being's life narrative well.

The semantic interpretation has rested against the ontology of the study. In the different phases of the concept determination the ontological has guided us toward a specific direction which has sharpened the focus toward new exciting horizons of understanding. The concept analysis has opened up for the contextual and penetratingly explorative through the corresponding hermeneutic dialectic. The etymological historical meaning context of the concept serve has enabled a wider and more unified understanding of the historical conceptual connection through descriptions. Its etymological history has aided in supporting the description of the meanings and phenomena of the concept.

Serve is well documented in Swedish dictionaries as well as dictionaries in other languages. The language has influenced the development and use of the concept over time. The vocabulary of caring science is affected because language has transported a new perspective on the concept. The concept serve is a keyword in nursing administration and is experienced as particularly meaningful because serving creates a possible way into the understanding and interpretation of

different development and communication processes in a healthcare organizational context.

### Conclusion

The concept serving is a core concept for nursing administrations because it has a specific significance for nursing leadership and caring science language. In nursing administration the concept is brought together with learning, development and education to promote nursing leadership and caring science. Serving entails the idea of responsibility in nursing administration. Nursing leadership is engagement, a mission to serve, to promote life and health as well as alleviate suffering. The meaning of the word to serve can offer strength to nurse leaders in the challenging deed of nursing administration. Goal-oriented visions of nursing leadership and a caring science starting-point comprise built-in caring, ethical preconditions in nurse leaders' work. In their serving in nursing administrations nurse leaders can fulfill the functions of their position and highlight the art of nursing leadership in the world of caring.

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