

Nursing history as philosophy—towards a critical history of nursing

Thomas Foth RN, PhD, Associate Professor¹  | Jette Lange M.Ed, PhD Candidate¹ |
Kylie Smith PhD, Assistant Professor²

¹Faculty of Health sciences, School of Nursing, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada

²Mellon Faculty Fellow for Nursing & the Humanities, Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA

Correspondence

Thomas Foth, Faculty of Health sciences, School of Nursing, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada.
Email: tfoth@uottawa.ca

Abstract

Mainstream nursing history often positions itself in opposition to philosophy and many nursing historians are reticent of theorizing. In the quest to illuminate the lives of nurses and women current historical approaches are driven by reformist aspirations but are based on the conception that nursing or caring is basically good and the timelessness of universal values. This has the effect of essentialising political categories of identity such as class, race and gender. This kind of history is about affirmation rather than friction and about the conservation of memory and musealization. In contrast, we will focus on how we imagine nursing history could be used as a philosophical, critical perspective to challenge the ongoing transformations of our societies. Existing reality must be confronted with strangeness and the historically different can assume the function of this counterpart, meaning present and past must continuously be set in relation to each other. Thus, critical history is always the history of the present but not merely the pre-history of the present – critique must rather present different realities and different certainties. In this paper, we use this approach to discuss the implementation of the nursing process (NP) in Germany. The nursing process appears to be a technology that helped to set up an infrastructure - or assemblage - to transform nursing interventions into a commodity exchangeable between consumers and nurses in a free market. In our theoretical perspective, we argue that NP was a step in the realization of the German ordoliberal program, a specific variety of neoliberalism. In order to implement market-orientation in the healthcare system it was necessary to transform hospitals into calculable spaces and to make all performances in the hospital calculable. This radically transformed not just the systems, but the ways in which nurses and patients conveyed of themselves.

KEYWORDS

economics, Foucault, history of nursing, nursing philosophy, power, the role of nurses