

Historiography: A legitimate research methodology for nursing

Historical research, a methodology generally accorded scholarly recognition by other disciplines, has yet to achieve full credibility and acceptance within the profession of nursing. This article examines the historical approach and demonstrates that its products constitute legitimate knowledge for nursing. It critically analyzes various extant epistemologies and ontologies that have affected the discipline of nursing, such as logical positivism, the paradigmatic and evolutionary views, and the postempiricist approaches, and ascertains that these belief systems vary greatly in the amount of support that they provide to the historical method of research.

LTC Mary T. Sarnecky
United States Army Nurse Corps
Doctoral Candidate
Philip Y. Hahn School of Nursing
University of San Diego
San Diego, California

I NTEREST IN the use of historiography as a professionally acceptable method of nursing research is steadily gaining momentum. An increasing number of reports of historical research are appearing in nursing's research literature, and significant numbers of nurses' doctoral dissertations are using this methodology. Numerous scholars of nursing are acknowledging the importance of this approach to the survival and advancement of the discipline and to the enhancement of clinical practice.

In spite of the recent, promising gains in the recognition of historiography as an acceptable form of scholarship, however, some unyielding remnants of suspicion about its utility and intellectual merit linger. Many nurses do not consider historical investigation proper, rigorous research. By the

The views of the author are her own and do not purport to reflect the position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.

The author thanks Dr Anna Omery, Dr Irene S. Palmer, and Dr George J. Sarnecky for their comments and support during the preparation of this article.

Adv Nurs Sci 1990;12(4):1-10
©1990 Aspen Publishers, Inc.

same token, a few doctoral programs in nursing do not allow dissertations that use a historical approach. Additionally, in some institutions, faculty research executed in the historical mode is accorded little, if any, attention in the process used to sanction tenure. Still others in the profession perceive this methodology as an effortless exercise whose product is merely a chronology of facts, events, or ideas. The sad truth remains that historiography has too rarely been cherished and valued in the discipline of nursing. Rather, it has been traditionally neglected and viewed by all but a few as inferior to the more prestigious quantitative approaches.

This article seeks to examine the historical methodology of investigation, also referred to as historiography, and to demonstrate that its products constitute legitimate knowledge for nursing, thus rebutting fallacies that currently abound. It will also look at the various extant epistemologies and ontologies and ascertain whether their belief systems will support historical research in nursing.

THE PROCESS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

Definition

Most nurse historians define historical research from the standpoint of process. Spieseke¹ discusses history in terms of locating and collecting sources of information, scrutinizing it for reliability, sorting it into patterns, and describing meanings derived from its study. According to Newton,² historical research involves seeking past facts, discovering relationships, drawing inferences, and interpolating between particular events. Christy³ agrees that historiography is

a process by which the researcher subjectively synthesizes and weaves together a diversity of facts. She emphasizes that this synthesis is the most salient part of the process because it produces meanings and points out significant relationships. Matejski⁴ defines history as the chronicle of human beings' responses to changes in the environment as they attempt to understand more clearly their antecedents and the present. Abdellah and Levine⁵ concur with this conceptualization of historical research, stressing that this method transcends the mere collection of dates and facts by focusing on the relationship of past occurrences with present day issues. Lynaugh and Reverby⁶ simply observe that historiography is the documentation of memory that is strengthened by dependable sources and is tested by the canons of logic and evidence. They perceive the historiographer's role to be that of the finder, evaluator, analyzer, and interpreter of evidence. Polit and Hungler⁷ describe this type of research as efforts to test hypotheses in relation to causes, effects, or trends of events in the past to enlighten current behaviors and practices.

Most authorities, therefore, see historical research as a process of examining data from the past, integrating it into a coherent unity and putting it to some pragmatic use for the present and the future. But definitions alone do not begin to address the value of historiography and the rationale for advocating its active employment in nursing research.

The importance of historiography to nursing

Church⁸ views the historical method and its resultant findings as necessary compo-

nents in the search for unity and continuity in the profession and as a means to foster a sense of self-appreciation by its members and esteem by the society it serves. Additionally, this nurse scholar states that "a sense of history seems appropriate as a prerequisite to a professional mentality."^{18(p275)}

Christy⁹ advances the notion that a dedicated study of the profession's past will enhance the discipline's progress and eliminate useless replication of former errors. On the same note, Notter¹⁰ advocates greater use of historical inquiry so that nurses can develop a broader, more complete perspective to facilitate an understanding of the present and the right approach to use for the future.

Ashley¹¹ predicts that if nursing continues to lack historical knowledge, the artistic facets of its practice will be significantly impeded and knowledge will not advance. Matejski¹² suggests that the values of historiography are that it can be used to discern trends and forces in society, that it can strengthen a society's desirable values and norms, that it can facilitate an understanding of human behavior by practitioners (who thus avoid judging people superficially), and that it can highlight dangerous situations that have been encountered before. Newton² envisions historical research as the curator of tradition, the model for the present, the creative innovator of the future, and the inspiration of the discipline.

Newton envisions historical research as the curator of tradition, the model for the present, the creative innovator of the future, and the inspiration of the discipline.

Thus, greater attention to the practice of historiography promises to profit the discipline of nursing. It will not only enhance professional unity and integrity, but also embellish the artistic side of disciplinary practice, enabling nurses to view humanity more fully from a holistic perspective. It will foster the development of nursing knowledge, show us the error of our ways, act as a source of professional pride, and also provide a spiritual sense of inspiration, thereby encouraging nursing professionals to strive to achieve previously inconceivable heights. But how can such advantages be achieved?

The methodology of historiography

Consensus on the appropriate methodology to produce historical findings is readily found in the literature. Furthermore, the process bears a marked resemblance to the procedures utilized in other types of scholarly research. The first step, as in any research effort, is to choose a problem area for study.¹³ The subject matter should be amenable to a historical approach; that is, it should focus on past events or ideas. In addition, the subject matter should be fairly well circumscribed so that it may be isolated from the whole of nursing history.¹⁴ Examples of topics appropriate for study might be the ideas of an early leader of nursing or the development of a state nursing organization. The desired circumscription is facilitated by a selection of a theoretic framework for the study.¹³ This action will also help to unify and clarify the complex, varied past under investigation. Biography, women's issues, political influences, diseases, or religious contributions are but a few theoretic frameworks that could be used to advance a historical thesis.

After carefully delineating the problem area, the historiographer must specify the data that will be needed to study the problem.¹⁵ The data may include a variety of evidence, such as documents (written materials) or information from pertinent living individuals (oral histories or interviews). This step is analogous to selecting a sample in other research studies.

Once the projected, necessary data have been specified, a search must be initiated to determine whether such data are available in sufficient quantity to carry out the study.¹⁵ Rarely is a plethora of adequate data readily available to the historiographer. It then becomes the historiographer's responsibility to research proficiently in spite of these limitations. The study may thus be carried out under the assumption that the available sample of data is all that is practically accessible and the sample must be considered adequate. Limited resources of time and money usually prevent access to the entire population of currently available data. Moreover, much of the previously existing data on the topic may have disappeared over the intervening years.¹⁶ Such constraints may lead a researcher investigating Nightingale's relationship with the British Army to restrict data collection to archives in the United States because the expense of seeking out worldwide resources would be prohibitive. This researcher is further limited because much preexisting evidence no longer survives.

If the available data are judged sufficient by criteria that were preset by the historiographer, data collection, the fourth step, begins. This involves sifting through materials to ascertain what is of value, what is mildly interesting and what is not pertinent to the study. Materials in the first category almost

certainly will be used, while information in the second category will require further examination prior to potential use or discard. The last category of materials will generally be rejected for use in the study. A letter written by Lavinia Dock to Isabel Hampton Robb will most assuredly prove valuable to a Dock biographer. Dock's appointment book may furnish some significant information, while a receipt for her laundry will shed no light on her ideas. Data that have been deemed appropriate for the study by the researcher's judgment then will be subjected to tests of validity and reliability.

The validity of each document used in the study will be verified through the process of external criticism. This process involves assessing the trustworthiness and authenticity of the document, in effect asking whether the document is really what it purports to be or is a fraud.¹⁷ It is normally assumed that documents held in reputable archives are authentic.

Internal criticism determines the reliability of the document and addresses the question of credibility. Subsumed under this type of criticism are the classifications of positive criticism and negative criticism. Positive criticism requires that the researcher fully understand the content of the evidence and that no more is implied from the data than that which the author intended. Negative criticism requires that the researcher evaluate the accuracy of the statements made in the evidence.¹³

When judging the accuracy of statements, it is important to consider the sources of the evidence. Primary source information is preferred, as it emerges from those who have personally witnessed events, is considered original, and is thought to have existed at the time of the event. Secondary sources, those

which are somehow removed from the original events and are hearsay accounts, are less reliable.¹⁶ A nurse who served in the Anzio offensive during World War II is considered a primary source. In general, her observations about the experience will be more accurate than a secondary account of the same event provided by a daughter of another Anzio nurse who bases her story on information related by her mother.

The existence of primary and secondary sources will help to determine whether evidence can be considered to be fact, probability, or possibility. Facts, on the one hand, are established when a researcher uncovers two primary sources that agree or when one primary source and one secondary source corroborate without major contrary evidence. Probability, on the other hand, is indicated when the researcher discovers one primary source with no contrary evidence or two primary sources that disagree slightly. Possibility exists when only secondary sources of evidence are available.¹⁶ All of these judgments, however, must be tempered by thoughtful consideration of the evidence and the nature of the sources.

An additional phase of the fourth step of data collection addresses the search for new data from known or previously unknown sources. This exercise will augment the researcher's ability to provide new insights from past occurrences.¹⁶ For instance, Julia Stimson's biographer can learn from surviving Stimson family members new information about the controversial closure of the Army School of Nursing that would not be discovered in archival documents. At some point, however, constraints imposed by dwindling resources or a naturally evolving conclusion will signal an end to the period of data collection.

Accordingly, initiation of the fifth step, the synthesis of the data, is then indicated. This phase entails the organization, integration, and analysis of the collected data into a logical sequence characterized by lucidity, coherence, and an absence of lacunae. This synthesis must be so skillfully done that the actual Herculean effort will appear to have been accomplished with ease.¹³

During this fifth phase, the historiographer also writes the research report, incorporating both the descriptive and the interpretive elements. The descriptive element will discuss the "how," "who," "what," "where," and "when," and will increase understanding of these components of past events. The interpretive element will address the "why" of the events.¹⁶

The final step of historical research is the application of the increased understanding of past issues and events to future directions.¹⁶ This application parallels the action in other types of studies of applying the results from those samples studied to the population at large. Ashley's¹⁸ historical treatise on early feminism in nurses and its impact on current professional conditions is an excellent example of proficient implementation of the last two steps of the historical process.

Not all nurse professionals pledge total allegiance to historiography. Similarly, not all research traditions ascribe legitimacy to its practice. The following section will ex-

The final step of historical research is the application of the increased understanding of past issues and events to future directions.

plore the degree of fit between the practice of historiography and various epistemologies and ontologies that have influenced nursing.

RELATIONSHIPS OF RESEARCH TRADITIONS TO HISTORIOGRAPHY

The received view

Logical positivism, the received view, is a philosophical position that has dominated both the natural and human sciences since the turn of the century. Proponents of this view¹⁹⁻²² support the utilization of the scientific method to advance knowledge from minimal facts to the level of laws. Attempts to prove causality are of primary concern yet the product (truth) is of greater importance than the process (linear reasoning). Methodologies sanctioned by logical positivists are quantitative in nature and all variables must be measurable and objective. In fact, objectivity is the hallmark of the received view. Logical positivism denies that values, aesthetics, ethics, opinions, or beliefs bear any relation to legitimate science. In addition, this school of thought does not address the application of science, thereby erecting significant barriers between the pure scientist and the scientific practitioner.

In view of these accepted attributes, how well does historiography interface with the logical positivist framework? Certainly, a function of historiography is the search for probable causality and explanations as well as for truth, facts and data. From this viewpoint, historiography is in some accord with logical positivism. However, historiography does not use sophisticated quantitative statistical methods such as a path-analytic ap-

proach or experimental design to arrive at probable causality.

Some historians, notably Buckle (cited in Garraghan²³ and in Teggart²⁴), have attempted to raise history to the heights of science by aspiring to extract general laws from its study. Their efforts have proven unsuccessful, however, and historiography has not been able to achieve what the logical positivist would consider law. The imperative of objectivity, a prime tenet of the received view, also contradicts the central features of historiography. Christy¹³ asserts that synthesis, the cornerstone of historiography, is a highly subjective art.

Qualitative methods predominate in historiography. Some historians employ a few quantitative techniques to include measures of probability, central tendency, and tests of significance, but this use constitutes a minority practice. Because the logical positivist school of thought only recognizes the rigid quantification of data, it would appear not to support the use of historiography.

A final characteristic of the received view that makes it essentially incompatible with historiography is its rejection of values, beliefs, norms, or opinions. These elements are consistent areas of prime concern for historiography. Were they ignored, a large segment of data for study would be eradicated, leading to an absolute failure to answer many fundamental questions.

Clearly, almost any attempt to carry out historical research in a climate of logical positivism would be exceptionally handicapped and ultimately doomed to failure. The fact that this school of thought has so tremendously dominated all knowledge development in nursing for such an extended period of time may explain why historiography has failed to flourish and assume its

rightful position as an effective approach for research in nursing. The received view's currently waning popularity may well indicate a new, more optimistic day for the acknowledgment of historiography as a valuable tool in nursing research.

The paradigmatic view

A mounting discontent with the limitations of the received view coincided with the appearance of Kuhn's²⁵ paradigmatic or revolutionary school of thought. This view envisions the development of knowledge as progressing through three recurring stages. The first, immature science or the preparadigmatic stage, is characterized by a diversity of perspectives, all of which consider the same range of phenomena, but that describe and research these phenomena in divergent manners. The second stage exists when one paradigm dominates during a period of normal science. This paradigm or disciplinary matrix²⁶ guides the pursuit of a shared goal or problems. The third stage is labeled revolutionary science and represents an almost violent abandonment of the reigning paradigm because of overwhelming anomalies (problems that the paradigm fails to address).

The paradigmatic view achieves a greater level of compatibility with the practice of historiography than does the received view. Normal science allows for some minimal influence to be exerted by subjective phenomena such as values, beliefs, norms, ethics, and aesthetics on knowledge and the paradigm. This concession provides historiography with the opportunity to use all types of knowledge, even subjective information.

Moreover, the paradigmatic view opens the door for use of qualitative as well as

quantitative methods of research. This initial, elementary, conditional approval of qualitative methodologies signals the beginning of a metamorphosis that will ideally culminate in equity and parity for all types of research.

Historiography may be viewed as having existed for many centuries in a state of normal science. It has arrived at some consensus about problems to be investigated and general agreement on historical theories and methodologies. It has exhibited common values and beliefs. It is composed of a discipline of scholars dedicated to the practice of historiography.

Unfortunately, Kuhn does not yet address the application of knowledge to practice. Since historiography, in its fullest sense, involves the application of its findings to present and future issues, this school of thought does not yet fully support all of the ramifications of historical research in nursing. Nevertheless, Kuhn's contribution is a prelude to legitimizing historiography in nursing research. The increasing acceptance of the methodology can be partially credited to the ideas promulgated by this philosopher of science.

The historicist view

Laudan^{27,28} proposes an evolutionary framework for understanding knowledge development. He advances the notion that research traditions, which are made up of norms, knowledge, and process, guide the progression of knowledge. Unlike previous schools of thought, this view holds values, aesthetics and ethics as an integral, important part of the research tradition.

In contrast to the received view, the historicist view values the process over the

product. Theory reduction is the norm and the solved problem, empirical or conceptual, is a basic building block of disciplinary progress. Legitimate knowledge can incorporate whatever is germane to the discipline, be it subjective, descriptive, normative, evaluative, or objective. The prime concern of the historicist is whether problems that require an answer are adequately solved.

Obviously, historiography can be carried out in much greater harmony within the historicist viewpoint than within previously existing schools of thought. This evolutionary viewpoint is more practical and more fully addresses the problem of pure science *vis à vis* applied science. Historiography, with its inherently pragmatic qualities, is unequivocally sanctioned by this epistemology.

Furthermore, the values, beliefs, and norms that are essential ingredients of data collection in historiography are similarly crucial components of the research traditions. Rather than considering these elements as unrelated or minimally important influences, both the historicist view and the method of historiography elevate them to the status of prime constituents, well worthy of consideration. In addition, the historicist does not eliminate old ideas as new knowledge is formed. This evolutionary attitude is in keeping with the standards of historiography wherein old ideas form the basic foundation for new knowledge.

Solved problems mark the advance of knowledge in the historicist tradition. Historiography does contribute to the resolution of questions and problems by providing background information on which to intelligently base decisions about present-day issues. This aspect of historiography is congruent with the historicist framework.

Finally, the qualitative methodologies are accepted by Laudan²⁷ as valuable, effective tools. Since historiographers use qualitative methodologies predominantly, the union of historiography and the historicist framework is harmonious and compatible.

Postempiricist views

During the last few decades, a number of additional schools of thought have emerged that are categorized as postempiricist. One presently evolving view is that of feminism.²⁹⁻³¹ This school of thought is relationship centered and value oriented. Its goal is to amplify knowledge by broadening its vantage points to include the political dynamic, values, feminist and minority problems, and nonscientific problems. Feminism affirms that methods and problems that deviate from the scientific mode should not be devalued. Its main contribution is its inclination toward liberation.

An additional postempiricist movement is the school of thought that includes phenomenology and hermeneutics.³²⁻³⁵ Phenomenology attempts to describe the structural essences of phenomena as they appear in their natural settings. The defining feature of phenomenology is reductionism, focusing on the phenomenon itself to the absolute exclusion of the rest of the world. Hermeneutics extends itself beyond the mere description of phenomena that characterizes phenomenology and attempts to achieve a fuller understanding of meanings. It posits that any description is incomplete until it is interpreted through culture and history. The hermeneutic circle (a sequential study of the entire whole, followed by an examination of its parts, and a restructuring of these parts

back into a whole as an exercise to enhance understanding) includes a consideration of virtues, values, and beliefs.

Critical theory is yet another postempiricist school of thought that further builds on phenomenology and hermeneutics.^{32,36} This dynamic belief system studies the meanings of phenomena to the individual and relates these meanings to societal norms. In other words, critical theorists interpret knowledge through the framework of history and culture, and also from the perspective of social norms. This political view actively assesses the relative worth of values, beliefs, and opinions.

All of the postempiricist schools of thought demonstrate compatibility with the practice of historiography. They all permit a choice of methodology as dictated by the phenomena to be studied. They all stress the importance of consideration of a portion or the totality of the context when studying a phenomenon. The feminist school is value oriented and unique in its refusal to accord less significance to nonscientific problems and approaches. The phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches, with their emphasis on meanings, are also apropos for the study of history. Furthermore, because the comparison of phenomena to societal norms is such an important feature of critical theory, postempiricism fully supports knowledge derived through historiography.

The acceptability of historiography when viewed in relation to the previously described epistemologies and ontologies varies greatly. At one end of the continuum lie the logical positivists who refuse to countenance historiography as a scientific endeavor in the pursuit of truth. The paradigmatic and the evolutionary views diverge from the scientific approach and their proponents accord increasing levels of respectability to historical research. On the opposite end of the continuum are the postempiricists who bestow full status upon historiography as a valid and reliable method for achieving advances in knowledge. With the introduction of contemporary research traditions, historiography is undeniably gaining recognition as a method that can make valuable contributions to the body of nursing knowledge.

Unquestionably, research is the key to a better future for nursing. The discipline urgently needs more studies undertaken from a wider variety of approaches to answer the many grave questions confronting it today. The many types of qualitative and quantitative methodologies all have valuable and unique contributions to make. All methodologies, including historiography, should be accorded equal respect and support by all members of the discipline of nursing.

REFERENCES

1. Spieseke AW. What is the historical method of research? *Nurs Res.* 1953;2:36-37.
2. Newton ME. The case for historical research. *Nurs Res.* 1965;14:20-26.
3. Christy TE. The hope of history. In: Fitzpatrick ML, ed. *Historical Studies in Nursing*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press; 1978.
4. Matejski MP. Humanities: The nurse and historical research. *Image.* 1979;11:80-85.
5. Abdellah FG, Levine E. *Better Patient Care Through Nursing Research*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Macmillan; 1979.

6. Lynaugh J, Reverby S. Thoughts on the nature of history. *Nurs Res*. 1987;36:4,69.
7. Polit DF, Hungler BP. *Nursing Research: Principles and Methods*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Lippincott; 1987.
8. Church OM. Historiography in nursing research. *West J Nurs Res*. 1987;9:275-279.
9. Christy TE. The need for historical research in nursing. *Res Nurs Health*. 1981;4:227-228.
10. Notter LE. The case for historical research in nursing. *Nurs Res*. 1972;21:483.
11. Ashley J. Foundations for scholarship: Historical research in nursing. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 1978;1:25-36.
12. Matejski MP. Historical research: The method. In: Munhall PL, Oiler CJ, eds. *Nursing Research: A Qualitative Perspective*. Norwalk, Conn: Appleton-Century-Crofts; 1986.
13. Christy TE. The methodology of historical research: A brief introduction. *Nurs Res*. 1975;24:189-193.
14. Austin AL. The historical method in nursing. *Nurs Res*. 1958;7:4-10.
15. Shafer RJ. *A Guide to Historical Method*. Chicago, Ill: Dorsey Press; 1980.
16. Fox DF. The historical approach. In: Fox DF, ed. *Foundamentals of Research in Nursing*. Norwalk, Conn: Appleton-Century-Crofts; 1982.
17. Kerlinger FM. Historical and methodological research. In: *Foundations of Behavioral Research*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston; 1964.
18. Ashley JA. Nursing and early feminism. *Am J Nurs*. 1975;75:1,465-1,467.
19. Norbeck JS. In defense of empiricism. *Image*. 1987;19:28-30.
20. Popper K. Science: Conjectures and refutations. In: *Essays in the Philosophy of Science*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press; 1979.
21. Popper K. The rationality of scientific revolutions. In: Hacking I, ed. *Scientific Revolutions*. Oxford, England: University Press; 1985.
22. Quine, WV. *Theories and Things*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press; 1981.
23. Garraghan GJ. *A Guide to Historical Method*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press; 1946.
24. Teggart FJ. *Theory and Processes of History*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press; 1962.
25. Kuhn TS. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press; 1962.
26. Kuhn TS. *The Essential Tension*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press; 1977.
27. Laudan L. *Progress and its Problems: Towards a Theory of Scientific Growth*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press; 1977.
28. Laudan L. A problem-solving approach to scientific progress. In: Hacking I, ed. *Scientific Revolutions*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press; 1985.
29. Harding S. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; 1986.
30. Fox-Keller E. *Reflections on Gender and Science*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press; 1985.
31. MacPherson, KI. Feminist methods: A new paradigm for nursing research. *Adv Nurs Sci*. 1983;6:17-25.
32. Allen D, Benner P, Diekelmann N. Three paradigms for nursing research: Methodological considerations. In: Chinn P, ed. *Nursing Research Methodology: Issues and Implementation*. Rockville, Md: Aspen Publishers, 1986.
33. Cohen MZ. A historical overview of the phenomenologic movement. *Image*. 1987;19:31-34.
34. Natanson M. Phenomenology as a rigorous science. In: Luckman T, ed. *Phenomenology and Sociology*. New York, NY: Penguin Books; 1978.
35. Omery A. Phenomenology: A method for nursing research. *ANS*. 1983;6:49-63.
36. Scrag C. *Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences*. West Lafayette, Ill: Purdue University Press; 1980.