

Historical Methodology for Nursing Research

Brigid Lusk

Purpose: To describe the basic tenets of historical research methodology, with emphasis on researching nursing history.

Aims: To introduce students and researchers to historical research, through substantive guidelines for library and archival research, and definitions of primary and secondary sources. To discuss ethical considerations—particularly those provoked by recent scholarly interest in the history of ordinary people. To explore issues of external and internal criticism. To discuss analysis, synthesis, and presentation of historical findings.

Conclusions: Historical research, as a type of scholarly inquiry, requires attention to methodology to uncover and interpret findings for nursing.

[Keywords: history; methodology]

Metodología histórica

Propósito: Describir los principios básicos de la metodología histórica con énfasis en la historia investigativa de la enfermería.

Metas: (1) Iniciar a los estudiantes e investigadores a la metodología histórica utilizando las fuentes primarias y secundarias y guías específicas en la búsqueda de información de archivo y bibliografía. (2) discutir las consideraciones éticas particularmente aquellas que han provocado interés reciente entre los eruditos de la historia de personas comunes. (3) explorar asuntos de crítica interna y externa, para discutir el análisis, la síntesis y la presentación de los datos encontrados.

Conclusión: La investigación histórica, como un ejemplo de investigación doctoral, requiere el fijar la atención a la metodología para poder descubrir e interpretar los hallazgos que tienen significancia para la enfermería.

[Palabras claves: metodología; investigación histórica; bibliografía y archivos; fuentes primarias; fuentes secundarias; ética]

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As the millennium approaches, it is timely to reflect on nursing's diverse contributions to society. The scientific and artistic dimensions of nursing can be revealed and defined through nursing's history (Sarnecky, 1990). Moreover, Maggs (1996) emphasizes that knowledge of nursing history creates occupational cohesion and exclusivity, which he cites as "Hallmarks of an emerging profession" (p. 632). Lynaugh (1996) describes nursing history as, "Our source of identity, our cultural DNA" (p. 1).

Historiography, the methodology of historical research, includes techniques, principles, and theories that pertain to historical matters. *The Random House Dictionary* (1996) states that historiographers are usually associated with official histories of groups, institutions, or periods, and that both historians and historiographers are experts in or writers of history.

Historians may not follow a set methodology, although there is some methodological consensus among leading historians. There are stages through which most historical research passes (Burns & Grove, 1993; Glass, 1989). These stages include choosing a topic and an appropriate theoretical framework, finding and accessing the sources, and analyzing, synthesizing, interpreting, and reporting

the data. Lynaugh and Reverby (1987) state that there is no one single historical method. However, Hamilton (1993) asserts that novice historians should become aware of sound historical techniques by immersing themselves in good historiography.

Choosing a Topic

The topic chosen will direct, guide, and confine an historical analysis (Hamilton, 1993). Topics should be significant, with the potential to illuminate or place a new perspective on current questions, thus contributing to scholarly understanding. Topics should also be feasible in terms of data and resource availability. Finally, topics should be intriguing and capable of sustaining a researcher's interest.

Brigid Lusk, RN, PhD, *Beta Omega, Alpha Lambda*, is Assistant Professor, Northern Illinois University, School of Nursing, DeKalb. Correspondence to Dr. Lusk, Northern Illinois University School of Nursing, 1240 Normal Road, DeKalb, Illinois 60115.

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Historical topic selection depends on one's knowledge of a subject. Nursing history texts such as that of Kalisch and Kalisch (1995), or historical interpretations, such as that by Reverby (1987) or Melosh (1982), furnish many ideas for future research. Reading about a specific time period—war, an epidemic, or an economic depression—may help one focus. Extensive background reading also provides a contextual guide and can loosely define the elements and questions a researcher should look for in historical documents. Glass (1989) emphasized the sense of completeness of the subject area that background reading generates—thus alerting a researcher to missing data that should be tracked down. Background reading also brings richness and depth to a subject, faintly coloring in the fabric of the diverse ephemera of daily life and adding complexity and realism. A thorough knowledge of the context and details of a subject can save researchers and archivists time, frustration, and expense.

Historical research relies on existing sources or data, which are usually found in archives. Researchers who are new to a field must therefore attempt to locate data before proceeding further with a study (Hill, 1993). Data location can be accomplished by consulting with a specialist in the area of interest, noting primary sources cited in the literature, reviewing guides of major manuscript collections, or visiting archives to ascertain the range of their collections.

Some topics might present themselves quite unexpectedly. An interesting example of serendipity was reported by Daisy (1991). She was browsing at an antique show when she spotted an old nursing pin from the local psychiatric hospital. Interested, she picked it up and read the inscription: "Presented to Annie W. Goodrich by the Post-Graduate Class of 1939" (p.408). Why was Annie Goodrich, renowned early nurse leader, active in a psychiatric hospital during her twilight years? Daisy's topic was found and her research began.

Once chosen, the topic will probably need refinement, as for any research. A broad historical sweep cannot result in the depth necessary for worthwhile interpretation (Matejski, 1986). Narrow, perhaps natural boundaries formed by time periods or events contribute to significant research.

Some historians support the use of organizing frameworks while others do not. A framework may be the key to preventing loss of the topic's focus amid fascinating diversions. Brown (1993) notes that a framework helps one to organize content and illustrate the direction and purpose of arguments. A framework, or perspective, can also be helpful in interpreting and presenting findings (Hamilton, 1993). Furthermore, frameworks convey author bias. A feminist framework alerts the reader that the researcher is working from the assumption that women and men have different experiences, while a political framework may reflect normative beliefs about power and governance. Melosh (1982) placed her extensive nursing study in the framework of nursing as a craft. She described craftswomen as having intrinsic power because of their specialized knowledge, yet being subservient to professionals.

Finding and Gaining Access to Sources

Libraries, Librarians, and Databases

Libraries are the first place to search and a librarian's assistance

in selecting appropriate indexes is indispensable. The pleasure of this pursuit should not be underrated. Historian Tuchman (1981) wrote: "The card catalog, to my mind, is the supreme advantage of being an American; if there are others, they are secondary" (p.77). A thorough search of library databases should be undertaken, including a search of separate catalogs of older collections. Government publication guides, press and journal indexes, indexes of books published, doctoral dissertations, and guides to reference books should be searched as necessary.

Useful indexes include *America: History and Life*, *Historical Abstracts* and, for the health sciences, the *English Subject Catalogue of the History of Medicine and Related Sciences* (Wellcome Institute). Computerized databases include the Wilsonline (H.W.Wilson) for the social sciences and the humanities, DIALOG (ABC-Clio, Inc.) and BRS for historical studies, and HISLINE (National Library of Medicine) for the history of medicine, nursing, and other health-related groups. Relevant materials will then form an initial bibliography of the subject area. Hill (1993) suggests compiling a list of names at this stage, including people, organizations, and places, to facilitate later searching.

Sources published at the time of the historical event may also be found in the library. Indexes to older documents include the *Combined Retrospective Index to Journals in History, 1838-1974* and the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900*. Hill (1993) lists several of these indexes. Older nursing articles may be found through Henderson's four volume *Nursing Studies Index*, an annotated guide to the existing English-language nursing literature from 1900 to 1959. Sometimes, however, searching for articles involves simply paging through old journals, which is absorbing yet time-consuming, or finding references in other works, old or recent. It is sometimes productive to browse in used bookstores, particularly those with nursing or medical collections.

Journals and books can be supplemented by other sources. *Who's Who*, *Who Was Who*, and obituaries can yield information about target people. *The New York Times Obituary Index* lists over 350,000 deaths that occurred from 1858 to 1968, while state and local historical societies may have indexes of obituaries from local newspapers. A standard biographical source for women is *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*. Lastly, census data, both national and state, may be consulted. The national U.S. census is taken every 10 years and the original raw data, upon which it is based, is made entirely open as a primary source 72 years afterwards.

Primary sources are documents by people who participated in or witnessed an event. Usually unpublished, documents such as diaries, letters, personal notes, or meeting minutes are all primary sources. Barzun and Graff (1992) and Matejski (1986) assert that a researcher using primary sources produces a secondary source. Hamilton (1993) states that modern interpretations of an event are tertiary sources: secondary sources are contemporary accounts that react to the ideas of a primary author. Whatever way these sources are classified, researchers should read the sources as close to the event as possible, ideally those written by a participant or witness.

Archives and Archivists

Primary sources are generally found in archives. The most

comprehensive catalog of archival collections is the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* which is published, with supplements, by the Library of Congress. Searching may be facilitated by searching for names in the *Index to Personal Names in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*. Librarians can assist through the Research Libraries Information Network, an online source that allows archival searching. Specific information about archives, addresses, restrictions, and titles of published guides, are found in the *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States*, produced by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Archivists may list their recent accessions in scholarly historical journals such as the *Journal of American History* and the *American Archivist*. The classic women's history source is Hinding, Bower, and Chambers (1979) *Women's History Sources: A Guide to Archives and Manuscript Collections*.

Collections in the United States

Apart from these major sources, there are others in the United States for nurse historians. The Interagency Council on Library Resources for Nursing publishes a *Guide to Archival Sources in Nursing* which is regularly updated. Many hospitals, charitable organizations, nursing, and other health-related organizations maintain archives, which a small amount of investigation should uncover. State licensing departments may keep records of nurse training schools that have been inspected for licensure, a regulatory process which began in the early 20th century.

Non-traditional repositories are also being used in the United States more extensively because of recent scholarly interest in the lives of ordinary people (Hinding, 1993). However, unofficial holdings are endangered because archival maintenance is not usually an owner's primary concern. For example, Reverby (1987), an historian, deplored the fact that student records at the Waltham Training School for Nurses, an unusual early training school, were all destroyed in 1978 because they were deemed unimportant. The training school records of Chicago's Provident Hospital, an early African-American school, also appear to have been discarded.

Formal archival collections are groups of documents that have been created through the activity of an organization or individual and have been intentionally saved because of the information they contain (Hill, 1993; Gracy, 1988). Conversely, manuscripts are individual documents that have been saved only through luck or chance. The modern idea of collecting groups of documents and allowing the public to view them originated with the founding of the *Archives Nationales* in France, in the middle 1790s, inspired by revolutionary zeal for bureaucratic accountability. The United States National Archives were opened in Washington, DC in 1934. Ideally, documents are saved in the original groupings in which they were collected, termed *provenance*, and kept chronologically in their original order, or with *respect des fonds*. Catalog entries list the collections by their *provenance* or original grouping.

With the information "explosion" in the late 20th century, archivists have difficulty judging what to save. Hinding (1993) notes that every 4 months the U.S. federal government produces a stack of documents equal to all those produced in the 124 years from the presidency of George Washington to that of Woodrow Wilson. Every year, U.S. bureaucrats generate 250 billion pages

of paper (Jensen, 1992). Electronic storage of records is efficient and much less expensive than saving paper records. Computerized records also enable scholars to scan and process data more efficiently. However, electronic storage and the need for a standardized document format are problematic as is dependency on outdated software and hardware (Zweig, 1993).

When a potential archive has been identified, researchers contact the archivist to discuss the focus of their study and obtain assistance and a "finding aid." Most large archives have such aids, which describe holdings within a collection. Typically, finding aids furnish titles, sizes, and brief descriptions of archival groups. Rarely, a distant archivist may mail copies of a few requested documents; a visit to examine documents is more usual. If an archive is private—containing, for example, records of a business and maintained primarily for the use of that business—a researcher may be denied entry or the search may be severely restricted because of concerns about confidentiality.

Concern for the safety of collections requires that archivists exercise caution when producing documents which are usually irreplaceable. Some identification will often be requested and students may need to present letters from their professors. Researchers should be prepared, through background reading, to explain the research topic to the archivist and to describe well-defined areas of need. Brooks (1969), a noted archivist, tells with some indignation of the graduate student who telephoned him at the Harry S. Truman Library, and asked: "What can you tell me about him?" (p.38). Browsing in archival collections is a joy denied researchers because of concerns about misfiling and security: "professional browsers," archivists, must know what to look for. In addition, archivists can suggest other collections that may be of use. Archivists keep topics of research confidential unless researchers request that they be put in touch with others working in a similar field.

Legal and Ethical Issues

Copying, copyright, and property right restrictions and practices are also archival concerns. Archivists will usually make the requested copies; sometimes the researcher will be allowed to, and sometimes—rarely—copying is prohibited. The responsibility of protecting copyright is a matter of serious concern. The U. S. copyright law was adopted in 1976, and gives the holder "The exclusive legal right to reproduce, publish, and sell the matter and form of a literary, musical or artistic work" (Crawford, 1983, p.137). However, the doctrine of "fair use" allows short quotations for purposes of criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research (Crawford). Copyright laws concerning unpublished works are complex, particularly if a work was created during recent decades. Property rights present another potential problem; frequently a donor places restrictions upon use of documents. An archivist will explain the restrictions to the researcher and, with very sensitive material, may require that the researcher's notes be submitted for inspection.

If a researcher proposes to cite direct quotations from unpublished material, permission from whomever controls publication rights must be obtained. The archives may have this

authority, but sometimes consent of the copyright owner is required, which can lead to lengthy and complicated searches. With most unpublished material, including letters, the copyright owner is the author, not the recipient of the document. A general exception to these copyright restrictions are letters and other documents in government archives and the archives of public institutions, which are usually in the public domain (Hill, 1993). Whether or not permission is legally necessary, it is courteous and considerate to inform original authors or family members about the nature of the ongoing historical research.

Ethical issues concerned with confidentiality of personal records must also be considered. With recent interest by historians in the lives of ordinary people, documents that even as recently as the 1980s would have been deemed uninteresting are now being examined. The most easily obtainable and best preserved records are often those of highly vulnerable groups where anonymity is needed, including children, prisoners, employees, students, the elderly, and the mentally ill. If people are still alive, there is great cause for concern. In partial response to these issues, the American Historical Association (1987) and the American Association for the History of Medicine (1991) have published guides on professional conduct and ethical issues in historical research. In nursing, Birnbach, Brown, and Hiestand (1993), under the auspices of the American Association for the History of Nursing, have developed ethical guidelines for nurse historians which emphasize the importance of the principles of informed consent, intellectual honesty, and confidentiality. If a person is to be named in a report, a cautious researcher seeks permission from, or at least notifies, the person or heirs, and, obviously, all facts are documented. In much historiography, just anonymous evidence of lives and experiences is sought but even in these cases strict confidentiality should be maintained. Glass (1989) recommends conservative use of personal records.

Analyzing, Interpreting, and Reporting

Note-taking begins as the first folder of documents is delivered. Each card or computer entry must clearly identify the archive, the collection, the folder, the file, and the document. References must be correct, for personal integrity, deference to the archivist and other researchers, and for being able to return to the source. In addition to careful note identification, a system of ordering the data by subject greatly facilitates the writing stage; Jensen (1992) suggests using colored pencils or stickers. Kruman (1985) recommends cross-referencing if information is applicable to two subjects.

Whether to take notes on paper, cards, or laptop computers is a matter of personal preference. Paper may be cut into half-sheets and is lighter to carry than cards if notes become extensive. Some researchers use loose-leaf journals, leaving a wide margin for source identification. A computer, used at the discretion of the archivist, may be preferred and some consider it essential for voluminous notes. Hand-held scanners with parallel port interfaces have recently become available for use with laptop computers. Scanners have enormous potential to reduce time and expense, and are safer for fragile documents than photocopiers. Scanners typically come with text-recognition software to partially automate the note-taking

process. Text-based management systems allow users to organize the data following entry. *Magellan* (Lotus, MA, 1991) or *AskSam* (AskSam Systems, Perry, FL, 1991) are two of several recommended by Jensen (1992) that can be used alone or to complement a data-based management system.

Tuchman (1981) suggests also noting fascinating contextual details which can be used to provide atmosphere and set the stage for the study's focus. In her research for *The Guns of August* Tuchman discovered the Kaiser gave his wife 12 new hats on each of her birthdays. He chose the hats, but she had to wear them. For Tuchman, this detail defined the German man of the era.

It is difficult to tell when the note-taking should stop. Cramer (1992) suggests reading until "You can hear people talking" (p.6) while Brooks (1969) wrote depreciatively of a professor whom he knew who had collected thousands of cards full of notes and thought he was making progress. Glass (1989) recommends that data collection stop when the same information repeatedly appears. A study framework will guide the amount of notes, and, just as in quantitative research, a representative sample will allow greater generalization.

A further similarity with quantitative research concerns validity and reliability, traditionally in history called external and internal criticism. Essentially, external criticism questions whether a document is authentic. The paper, ink, date, and writing or typing are some of the details that must be verified. This verification may require expert advice from researchers in several disciplines. Platt (1981) suggests several ways for historical researchers to uncover historical fraud, including requiring other related documents for comparison of style or content, or examining different versions of the same original document. Platt also warns researchers to determine who has had access to documents over the years and their motives. Platt further reminds researchers to ascertain if a document makes sense or has obvious errors in it. A familiar example involved the fabricated evidence in the 1934 photograph of "Nellie" the Loch Ness monster. The confession of the last of the perpetrators of this fraud revealed that the "monster" was really a toy submarine ("Farewell," 1994). External criticism had failed.

Researchers in nursing's history may be less threatened by documents being invented or tampered with than are researchers from other fields. However, although the minutes of "St. Elsewhere's" Alumnae Association are unlikely to have been forged, problems with identification and dating of nursing documents are relevant. Christy (1975) described her frustration with sorting the extensive notes and memorabilia of Adelaide Nutting, an early nursing leader. The frugal Nutting used stationary she had acquired years before from hotels or steamship lines and even used old Johns Hopkins University stationary long after her 1907 move to Teacher's College at Columbia University.

Internal criticism moves beyond authenticity of a document to the reliability of information contained. Glass (1989) explains this as understanding what the writer meant and evaluating the accuracy of statements. To understand meaning, the researcher should be aware of the writer's motives and biases, and why the document was written and saved. Platt (1981) suggests that events described in passing, as unimportant facts, might be more reliable than a document's primary focus. Historical researchers need also to determine the correct meaning of words in the context of the time.

Dictionaries are helpful. For example, the definition of the term "abortion" in Stedman's *The Nurse's Medical Lexicon* of 1931 includes:


The giving birth to an embryo or non-viable fetus...A distinction is made between abortion and miscarriage, the former signifying the emptying of the uterus prior to the fourth month of pregnancy, the latter during the fourth, fifth, or sixth month... (p.3).

Thus, to read that a woman had an abortion in the 1930s may not have the same implication that it has today in the United States. The accuracy of the writer also must be questioned. Was the event recorded 10 minutes or 10 years after the event? Was the writer in good health? How much did the writer actually know about the event. Was he or she a bystander or intimately involved? Was the writer technically competent to describe the event? (Platt, 1981).

There are several guidelines to help with criticism and validation. Foremost is to search for corroborating evidence and seek out multiple sources from which to view a target event. Tuchman (1981) illustrates the necessity of corroboration by using one of Aesop's fables, in which a lion tells a man: "There are many statues of men slaying lions, but if only the lions were sculptors there might be quite a different set of statues" (p.19). Another suggestion, by Lee (1988) is to enlist the collaboration of experts in a variety of disciplines, particularly when examining contexts. Platt (1981) advises imagining the event, if there are conflicting sources, and making an informed judgment about which one has the best "fit." Hanson and Donahue (1996) provide vivid details of this critical process through their discussion of an American Civil War nurse's diary.

Finding meaning and synthesizing data are probably the most difficult activities in historical research. Maggs (1996) notes that "Historians, in so much as they are artists, are also visionaries" (p. 631). Research that describes data as merely facts or quotations, without scholarly interpretation, contributes little to understanding. Historians must mentally reconstruct an era and the events and players using primary sources, then interpret the story from this perspective. Visiting sites, perhaps handling artifacts, are ways suggested by Glass (1989) to become enveloped in the time period and place of events. In-depth analysis will lead to an individual conclusion, biased by the researcher's assumptions and interpretations but supported by the honest use of sources.

Researchers must then endeavor to write clearly, yet with color and, ideally, suspense. Sarnecky (1990) describes the finished historical research as being descriptive—answering who, what, when, where, and how questions—and as being interpretive, answering the why.

The challenges faced by nurses today, such as incurable infections and senseless violence, mirror events of the past. Through knowledge of nursing's history, insight and understanding are enhanced. In 1931, Adelaide Nutting declared, "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging the future but by the past" (p. 1389). To enhance awareness and prepare for the future, nursing historiography should be significant, meticulous, and challenging. 

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Application process: Send letter of interest, curriculum vitae and names, addresses and phone numbers of three professional references to: Kristine Henderer, RN, C, EdD, Search Committee, University of Portland, School of Nursing, 5000 N. Willamette Blvd., Portland, OR 97203-5798, (503) 283-7261 (phone), (503) 283-7399 (fax), henderer@uofport.edu (e-mail).

Deadline for application: Applications are currently being accepted and will continue to be accepted until the positions have been filled. Review of applications will begin December 1, 1997.

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