Social Theory and Nursing Practice

Sociology and Nursing Practice Series

Margaret Miers

Gender Issues and Nursing Practice

Sam Porter

Social Theory and Nursing Practice

Geoff Wilkinson (editor)

Power and Nursing Practice

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Social Theory and Nursing Practice

Sam Porter

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*Do Siobhán agus Ewan
Bualtraí arís*

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Series Editors' Preface

It is widely accepted that because sociology can provide nurses with valuable and pertinent insights, it should be a constituent part of nursing's knowledge base. To take but a few substantive examples, sociology can help nurses to understand the causes and distribution of ill health, the experience of illness, the dynamics of health care encounters and the limitations and possibilities of professional care. Equally importantly, sociology's emphasis on critical reflection can encourage nurses to be more questioning and self-aware, thus helping them to provide flexible, non-discriminatory, client-centred care.

Unfortunately, while the aspiration of integrating sociology into nursing knowledge is easy enough to state in theory, in practice their relationship has not been as productive as some might have hoped. Notwithstanding a number of works that have successfully applied sociological tools to nursing problems, there remains a gulf between the two disciplines, which has led some to question the utility of the relationship.

On the one hand, sociologists, while taking an interest in nursing's occupational position, have not paid great attention to the actual work that nurses do. This is partially the result of the limitations of sociological surveillance. Nurses work in confidential, private and intimate settings with their clients, and sociologists' access to such settings is necessarily restricted. Moreover, nurses find it difficult to talk about their work, except to other nurses. As a result, core issues pertaining to nursing have been less than thoroughly treated in the sociological literature. There is thus a disjunction between what nurses require from sociology and what sociologists can provide.

On the other hand, nurses are on equally uncertain ground when they attempt to use sociology themselves. Nurses are often reliant on carefully simplified introductory texts, which, because of their broad remit, are often unable to provide an in-depth understanding of sociological insights. Nor is it simply a matter of

knowledge; there are tensions between the outlooks of nursing and of sociology. Because nursing work involves individual interactions, it is not surprising that when nurses turn to sociology, they turn to those elements that concentrate on microsocial interaction. While this is useful in so far as it goes, it does not provide nurses with knowledge of the restraints and enablements imposed upon individual actions by social structures.

The aim of the *Sociology and Nursing Practice* series is to bridge these gaps between the disciplines. The authors of the series are nurses or teachers of nurses and therefore have an intimate understanding of nursing work and an appreciation of the importance of individualised nursing care. Yet at the same time, they are committed to a sociological outlook that asserts the salience of wider social forces to the work of nurses. The texts apply sociological theories and concepts to practical aspects of nursing. They explore nursing care as part of the social world, showing how different approaches to understanding the relationship between the individual and society have implications for nursing practice. By concentrating on a specific aspect of sociology or nursing, each book is able to provide the reader with a deeper knowledge of those aspects of sociology most pertinent to their own area of work or study. We hope that the series will encourage nurses to analyse critically their practice and profession, and to develop their own contribution to health care.

Margaret Miers, Sam Porter and Geoff Wilkinson

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Intellectual projects of this size are rarely the result of an entirely individual effort, and this one is no exception. My colleagues, Ken Bishop, John Brewer, Denis O'Hearn, Sally Shortall and Jim Smyth, provided me with valuable insights and resources. My series editors, Margaret Miers and Geoff Wilkinson, gave me great support and encouragement. Margaret's speed of response to draft chapters, which were being produced under severe pressure of time, was much appreciated, as was the astuteness of her critical observations. Richenda Milton-Thompson at Macmillan must be congratulated for her great patience in the face of my continual procrastination. She showed considerable foresight in commissioning the series of books of which this is a part. I only hope that my efforts here justify her leap of faith.

At a more general level, I would like to thank all those researchers of nursing practice whose insights I recount. It was heartening indeed to see the quality of social theoretically informed work that is being done within the nursing arena.

Finally, I would like to mark my deep gratitude to Sandra Ryan. She not only acted as an unofficial editor, spending much precious time reading and commenting on each chapter as it fell from my personal computer, but also took up the domestic labour and child-caring slack that was an inevitable result of my attempt to write an entire book in 2 months. I do not deserve such generosity and good grace.