

HISTORICAL INQUIRY IN NURSING AND MIDWIFERY: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PAMELA WOOD AND LYNNE GIDDINGS

Pamela J. Wood, RGON, PhD, Associate Professor
Graduate School of Nursing and Midwifery, Victoria University of Wellington

Lynne S. Giddings, RGON, RM, PhD, Associate Professor
School of Nursing, Auckland University of Technology

Abstract

An essential component in the development of any profession is knowing its own historical foundation. To achieve an understanding of this past, the profession needs careful research which will offer an interpretation of past events, practice and people. Historical methodology is therefore a valid and important approach available to researchers in nursing and midwifery. This is the twelfth article in a series based on interviews with nursing and midwifery researchers, designed to offer the beginning researcher a first-hand account of the experience of using particular methodologies. This article incorporates a conversation on historical methodology between Pamela Wood (RGON, PhD) and Lynne Giddings (RGON, RM, PhD) who have completed numerous studies in the history of nursing, midwifery and public health.

Key Words: Methodologies, historical research, nursing history, midwifery history.

Introduction

As an essential component of its development a profession needs to have knowledge of its past. Understanding the foundation strengthens its sense of identity and place in the world. The profession needs carefully researched interpretations of its history, rather than polemical or romanticised accounts of its past. Researchers must therefore use a rigorous methodology which follows the conventions of historical research.

This article, the twelfth in a series based on interviews with nursing and

midwifery researchers, offers the beginning researcher a brief introduction to this research approach (refer to Giddings & Wood (2000) for background information on the series). It follows a slightly different format from other articles in this series. Rather than relating an interview with another researcher, it records a conversation we ourselves had about historical methodology. We have used this methodology for numerous studies in the history of nursing, midwifery and public health.

Wood, P. J., & Giddings, L. S., (2004). Historical inquiry in nursing and midwifery: A conversation between Pamela Wood and Lynne Giddings. *Nursing Praxis in New Zealand*, 20(2), 4-14.



Lynne Giddings



Pamela Wood

Lynne Giddings studied the origins of the Plunket Society for her BA (Hons) dissertation (Milne, 1976) and published further research on this subject (1993). For her PhD in Nursing (1997) she used a life history approach with nurses who perceived themselves as different, to explore the subject of social justice. Pamela Wood has researched and published in the history of nursing (1999; 2001a; 2001b; 2002; Ashton & Wood, 2001; Wood & Papps, 2001), nursing education (1992), midwifery (Wood & Foureur, 2004; Wood & Skinner, 2004), children's health (1993a; 1993b; 1996) and public health (Cooper, Law, Malthus & Wood, 2000). She has extended her PhD interest in the cultural history of dirt (1997) to explore the way 'dirt' mediated nurses' and midwives' understanding of their practice worlds in the early twentieth century.

The historical methodology encompasses research based on documentary sources, and other historical material such as photographs and films, or ephemera such as posters and pamphlets. It also encompasses research which generates its own sources, such as in oral history, life history and life story,

where historical material is gathered through interview. The purpose might be to offer an interpretation of some aspect of the past or, as in the case of oral history, to create an historical record for future use.

Historical research can offer a narrative account of the past, or interpret historical sources from a theoretical viewpoint, such as through a Marxist, Foucauldian or feminist lens. 'Historiography' is a term used to describe the historical research process, but can also refer to what historians have already written about a topic and the approach they have taken in doing this. Historical research can focus on a particular aspect of the past, as in economic or political history. It can tell the story of an organisation, such as a hospital or health service, or of a person, as in a biography. Historians used to tell the 'grand narratives' of change in a nation's past, but today they are more interested in smaller scale studies, which tell history 'from the ground up'. Different forms of historical methodology continue to emerge. Social history, for example, focuses on the experiences of 'ordinary people' and the influences of class and gender, while cultural history explores symbolic meanings and shared understandings within a particular historical group.

Historical research is therefore as varied as historians' interests. What all good histories have in common, however, is a rigorous process with meticulous referencing of the primary sources underlying each interpretive statement. A sound, reliable history is carefully researched and contains

no sweeping generalisations. It does not present a romanticised or polemical version of the past in order to further some political or professional agenda. Instead it allows members of the profession to cast a critical eye over the past in order to understand it, draw identity and strength from it, and to know the profession in a deeper way. It can also enable them to critique and deconstruct beliefs about their professional past which have become embedded in myth.

The following conversation about historical methodology is between Lynne Giddings (**LG**) and Pamela Wood (**PW**).

Conversation

LG: What does historical methodology mean to you, Pamela?

PW: To me it means using a rigorous process to investigate and uncover some aspect of the past and to interpret that for a current audience.

LG: How do you go about it?

PW: Well, the first thing you have to do when you've decided on your topic is to read secondary sources. In historical research we use both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are the ones that were created at the time of the event or the situation that you're investigating, by people who were there. Sometimes they were created later, but still by people who were there, such as in reminiscences or autobiographies. Secondary sources are the writings of other historians on

the topic. So the first task is to read the secondary sources, rather like doing a literature review in any other kind of research methodology. We need to understand the historiography – what has already been written by historians on the topic and how they have approached it.

LG: When I was an undergraduate student I used to go to the encyclopaedias as my first source on a topic. They are broad yet well referenced.

PW: Yes, secondary sources come first. You must have a working knowledge of them before you go into your primary sources or even approach an archive. Starting with the secondary sources also gives you some insight into the primary sources that other historians have used. That's a good way to start.

LG: One of the interesting things I enjoy about historical research is photography - documentation by image, seeing people doing things. What might some other primary sources be?

PW: Documents I've used have been official records like the minutes of meetings, correspondence and reports, or more personal things like people's diaries and letters. Primary sources could also be videos or oral history interviews.

LG: Newspapers are another major primary source. We know that newspapers are written to sell, and usually have a political slant. How have you used newspaper sources in your research?

PW: In my PhD on the changing meaning of 'dirt' in nineteenth-century Dunedin, I went through all the relevant newspapers, usually page by page, which was an absolute delight. It gives you far more than if you rely on a newspaper's index, that's if one has been created for it by the library. You have to be disciplined not to go down intriguing sidelines and alleyways though, especially the advertisements. [Laughter.] Everything I drew from a newspaper I tried to understand in the context of the paper itself. There's a very useful secondary sources on the history of newspapers in New Zealand, by Scholefield (1958), who discusses the editor and what kind of newspaper it was, so you get a context. Although it's more fun to turn the pages of the actual newspapers, sometimes you only have microfilms. The National Library now has a large number of historical newspapers on-line, so that makes research a lot easier if you can't get to sources in local libraries (<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/>).

LG: Where else do you find primary sources?

PW: You have to think about the places that might hold material relevant to your study. Archival research is extremely time-consuming and can sometimes have little reward in terms of finding something that's absolutely relevant. We will only ever have partial evidence because we can't cover everything, and not all the documents written at the time are available to us now. There are gaps. The jigsaw puzzle is not complete. In the end you have to make a reasonable selection of the primary

sources and explain that in your report. All we are ever doing is speculating and offering one interpretation. Unless the new researcher understands that, they will over-claim from the sources they are using.

LG: How much material do you think a researcher needs to collect?

PW: I've always followed the rule of thumb that you should collect more material than you think you might need. Otherwise you're limiting yourself right from the beginning. Some crucial evidence that you should be paying attention to is left behind.

LG: Developing a system of data tracking, whether it's by paper or computer is critical.

PW: Yes, and logging as you go. I always keep a log book with me so that every day I'm working on a project I enter where I've been, what I've looked at, what material I've covered, what good ideas I might have had and what secondary sources are relevant.

LG: When I go searching primary sources I take my laptop, making sure the batteries are charged because you can't always plug it in. I find that the easiest way to do it.

PW: I prefer using a small pad for taking notes from the documents, putting just one core idea on each page. In an archive you usually have to use a pencil, because ink might spill on to an old document and you can't always photocopy them as light will destroy the ink and paper. You have to be extremely careful in the way you

handle old documents, turning the pages very gently and keeping your hands off them as much as possible because the oil from your fingertips can destroy the paper. When I sift and analyse the material, I code each small page of notes by subject so I can cluster them according to the topics. I use a similar coding system on my secondary sources so that I can bring in the articles that are relevant at each point as I write.

LG: Because I have the material on computer, I use a programme like NVivo as an organiser for managing it and for coding.

PW: Yes, both ways are valid. One of the crucial things is to sit and think. Many new researchers don't fully understand the importance of that. You can't rush into it. You have to understand the material you have and how it might combine or contradict. So you need to sit and think and play with ideas – sketching it out on paper, doing a concept map of ideas, working and re-working the material so that you can start to make some sense of it.

LG: If you're not used to it, it can be scary because you're collecting piles of information. That reflective process is critical, asking 'what is this telling me about what happened?' It's not merely a process of describing that in 1911 this happened, in 1912 that happened, it's looking at themes that might run through the material.

PW: Yes, and you need to have a line of argument. Most of that is done in a straightforward, narrative way. But you can also bring particular

philosophical or theoretical lenses to the inquiry. You might be interested in power relations within the particular historical situation, so you might bring a Foucauldian lens to that study. My particular methodological style tends to be cultural history, so I'm able to bring in my background in social anthropology to the historical study. Cultural history draws on social anthropology and literary criticism to uncover symbolic meanings and shared understandings within a group or community in an historical context. It's the style of history I used in my PhD.

LG: It's only since my study of the Plunket Society that I've studied feminism, and what I didn't analyse in that study were the power relations between Truby King and the women in the Plunket Society. Historians since then have brought a feminist lens to it. It's not that my research was wrong, it's just that I didn't have that perspective for looking at the data at that time. So we do bring different perspectives at different times to how we interpret data.

PW: Yes, and the next step is to decide how you'll write it, chronologically or thematically. For example, in writing the history of nursing education you could follow it through say from 1901 to the 1970s, tracing the changes within each decade. Or you could do it the other way round and say what are the major themes? They might be changes in where education took place, the curriculum, examinations and the role of statutory bodies. You could write a section on each theme, noting chronological changes within each one. Either way is valid, and

usually you decide once you've thought through what argument you want to make. The key thing is to show continuities and changes. Each step of the research process has to be rigorous though. What do you think the issues of rigour are in relation to historical research?

LG: Well, generally we refer to internal and external criticism. You can imagine if you have historical documents from different groups debating an issue, say doctors and nurses, they all have a particular position. With internal criticism you try to find evidence that supports or contradicts their positions as presented in a document. How reliable is the information within the document?

PW: What about external criticism?

LG: We examine our findings and our argument in relation to what other historians have said and other forms of evidence. We establish the validity and reliability of the document. Was it written at the time claimed? Or indeed written by the person whose name appears at the end of the document? One has to be a sleuth. As you work through ensuring the reliability and validity of your primary sources, you have to be continually self-reflective.

For example, if you're researching something that you're passionate about, you have to be very aware that your position could bias the way you view evidence. So you say 'what is my bias?' and try to find evidence that specifically challenges that. Unfortunately nursing and midwifery

historical research has been full of bias because famous leaders are made out to be saints, like Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War.

Many people think that if they have a passionate interest in something they can write a history of it. That can be a major pitfall for a new researcher. They also need to be critical when they read secondary sources. The first question we ask is who wrote it and what did they have to gain from writing it?

PW: Yes, what was their agenda? We also need to be careful about primary sources. I think it's fairly safe to say we can trust the authenticity of a documentary primary source if it's been accepted by a credible archive such as Archives New Zealand, or an archive of an organisation, but what we have to ask is who wrote the document, what audience was it written for, and why was it preserved? Those three things can shape the content of a document and the range of documents that survive, and we need to bring that critique to them.

LG: Also, we're very aware with archives that many documents have been destroyed, thrown away. When organisations leave one building for another they tend to throw out documents that would be really important to an historian. So you can never answer all the questions. I think that's important. You never 'do' the history of something, it's never finished, and it can remain open to different lenses.

PW: Another aspect of rigour is providing an audit trail. Historians

are scrupulous in providing references to their primary sources. When they are creating their line of argument, they usually footnote the primary source which is the basis of the claim they are making. Anyone reading the history can go to that source, see it for themselves, then see whether they agree or disagree with the interpretation the historian has made. I think one of the strengths of historical research is that it follows that process rigorously.

LG: It gives an excellent audit trail. But where does a researcher start? With a research question?

PW: They can do, and this will direct them to secondary and primary sources. Sometimes history is done the other way round. You come upon an archive of primary sources and then you have to see what questions can be asked of those sources. An example of that is a study I'm doing at the moment with Maralyn Foureur, where we're investigating the archive of the Wellington St Helens Hospital (Wood & Foureur, 2004). The archive includes patient records from 1907 to 1980. Discovering the archive came first, and the questions came next. What do these records contain? What questions can we ask of them? Then alongside that, what secondary sources do we need to read to understand what we're looking at?

LG: Both of us have studied history, and we were both trained by Professor Hew MacLeod in the 1970s and early 1980s at Otago University in how to do historical research. He was able to convey the rigour of the research, the importance of documentation, the value of really good historiography.

PW: He trained us in the discipline of historical research. That has coloured all the research I've done since then, whether historical or not – it's the discipline and rigour of the method.

LG: Many nurses and midwives haven't had that training so if they want to do historical research I recommend that they study papers in historical method at a university. I know you also offer a Masters paper at Victoria. What else would you recommend to the new researcher?

PW: Read, read, read. It's crucial to have a working knowledge of the context of the time you are investigating. That might include reading general histories of New Zealand, then histories of nursing or midwifery, then any histories that are related to your topic. For people starting out, there's a good little book that introduces the whole methodology (Arnold, 2000). It's hard to find anything in the nursing literature that actually explains the process, though. What about the highlights of historical research for you?

LG: I love searching for the bits of the jigsaw puzzle. It's like being a detective. I enjoy the sense of coming to understand the context of things that happened, and demystifying things. I get a sense of awe that the people I'm researching existed. There's an excitement there. I enjoy meeting the people that were there at the time. Like the then young woman of 17 years who was employed by Truby King to care for the babies who were taken to his home at Karitane – Lizzie Fastier (nee Hughes), and

finding her view was entirely different from what had been presented in other histories.

Sometimes there's an ethical and political issue in discovering something. Sometimes you uncover information that not only challenges a myth but could lead to defamation. You might not have proof; you have something that leads to a question mark. Sometimes you have to leave it to people to read between the lines.

PW: I had to be very careful reporting an oral history project, again because of that defamation issue. Sometimes you have to sanitise or be circumspect in what you write.

For me the highlight of historical research is actually getting into an archive. My spirit sings. Even though it's dusty and dirty, the highlight is taking the lid off a box of documents or opening a leather-bound volume with beautiful marbling, and seeing handwriting that was written on the page a hundred or more years ago. So what's the future of historical research in nursing and midwifery as you see it, Lynne?

LG: Often it's missed in text books or it might be given a page and a half. So we need to find ways to acknowledge historical research as a valid methodology in nursing and midwifery research. We need history taught in undergraduate and post-graduate courses, and courses on historical methodology.

PW: My role, as I see it, is to offer nurses and midwives some well-researched historical interpretations

that let them see their lineage and heritage, and their connection with practice in the past. If their knowledge of their professional past is enriched, they then have a stronger place to stand professionally. We need so much more historical research so that we can be more careful about the claims we make in current debates, rather than going with the polemic or with the myths people hug to themselves.

There's endless scope for people to undertake research in nursing and midwifery history. What would be valuable is to have numerous histories written on particular aspects of the profession or practice. We're not wanting 'grand histories'. We're wanting to build up a mass of small, well written, pertinent histories on different areas of practice and the development of the professions.

LG: What about other kinds of historical research? For my PhD I collected the life stories or life histories of nurses who perceived themselves as different. Then there are oral histories too.

PW: One of the things that we should be paying attention to now is recording the stories of people today, whether they have retired from the professions or are currently engaged in them. Their oral histories would be invaluable for future historians. A number of these are already in the Oral History Centre of the Alexander Turnbull Library. We need to be doing more. Training is available for people to be doing that around the country.

LG: So people can be doing historical research not just for their Masters or

PhD degrees, but for other projects as well.

PW: Absolutely. This has been fun, my friend. Thank you.

Discussion and Conclusion

Historical methodology in nursing and midwifery research offers a rigorous process for uncovering, selecting and interpreting material relating to aspects of the past. It gives researchers a way to relate the past to current members of the profession, perhaps to strengthen their sense of professional identity or to challenge

prevailing myths. Whether history is seen as having a utilitarian purpose, or just as a way to learn about and understand the past, the methodology used to reveal it must always follow a rigorous and meticulous process. Whatever its focus, and whatever form it takes, historical inquiry offers a fascinating and important methodology to nursing and midwifery researchers.

For a summary of information concerning historical research, refer to Table 1.

References

- Arnold, J. H. (2000). *History: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ashton, C., & Wood, P. J. (2001). *Ellen Dougherty was first: Regulating nursing in New Zealand, 1901-2001*. Exhibition at Archives New Zealand, Wellington, September 2001 – September 2002. In collaboration with Valerie Morse, Archives New Zealand.
- Cooper, A., Law, R., Malthus, R., & Wood, P. J. (2000). Rooms of their own: Public toilets and gendered citizens in a New Zealand city, 1860-1940. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 7 (4), 417-433.
- Milne, L. S. (1976). *'The Plunket Society: An experiment in infant welfare'*, BA (Hons) dissertation, University of Otago, Dunedin.
- Giddings, L. S. (1993). Royal New Zealand Plunket Society. In Anne Else, (Ed.). *Women together: A history of women's organisations in New Zealand*, (pp.257-261). Wellington: Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs and Daphne Brasell Associates Press.
- Giddings, L. S. (1997). 'In/visibility in nursing: Stories from the margins', PhD in Nursing, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Denver, Colorado, USA.
- Giddings, L. S., & Wood, P. J. (2000). The methodological journey of a grounded theorist: An interview with Denise Dignam. *Nursing Praxis in New Zealand*, 16(2), 4-16.
- Scholefield, G. H. (1958). *Newspapers in New Zealand*. Wellington: Reed.
- Wood, P. J. (1992). 'Efficient preachers of the gospel of health': The 1898 scheme for educating Maori nurses. *Nursing Praxis in New Zealand*, 7(1), 12-21.
- Wood, P. J. (1993a). Hazardous to children's health? New Zealand primary schools, 1890-1914. *Historical News*, 66, 5-8.

- Wood, P. J. (1993b). 'Measles, mumps and mud': Childhood epidemics at the turn of the century. *Nursing Praxis in New Zealand*, 8(2), 24-9.
- Wood, P. J. (1996). The sick child, humanitarian narratives and the getting of hospitals. *Nursing Praxis in New Zealand*, 11(3), 50-4.
- Wood, P. J. (1997). 'Constructing colonial dirt: A cultural history of dirt in the nineteenth-century colonial settlement of Dunedin, New Zealand', PhD in History, University of Otago, Dunedin.
- Wood, P. J. (1999). A glimpse through the typhoid window: Connecting nursing care, medical treatment and the search for best practice, 1890-1920. In P. Watson & M. Woods, (Eds.). *Waiora: Nursing research in Aotearoa/New Zealand, evolving a shared sense of our future*, (pp.106-115). Palmerston North: New Zealand Nursing Organisation.
- Wood, P. J. (2001a). A century of Registered Nursing in New Zealand 1901-2001. *Nursing New Zealand centenary souvenir: 1901-2001*, (pp.6-10). Wellington: Nursing Council of New Zealand.
- Wood, P. J. (2001b). A German midwife and a New Zealand nurse: Adelheid Wassner. *Nursing Praxis in New Zealand*, 17(3), 62-7.
- Wood, P. J. (2002). Nursing's background of scholarly inquiry. In E. Papps, (Ed.). *Nursing in New Zealand: Critical issues, different perspectives*, (pp.40-51). Auckland: Pearson Education.
- Wood, P. J., & Foureur, M. (2004, in press). Integrating research perspectives: A New Zealand maternity archive, 1907-1922. In S. McGann & B. Mortimer, (Eds.). *New directions in the history of nursing*. London: Routledge Research, Studies in the Social History of Medicine Series.
- Wood, P. J., & Papps, E. (2001). *Safety to practise: Reflections of the chairpersons of the Nursing Council of New Zealand 1971-2001*. Wellington: Nursing Council of New Zealand.
- Wood, P. J., & Skinner, J. (2004). *A labour of love: 100 Years of midwifery registration in New Zealand, 1904-2004*. Exhibition at Archives New Zealand, Wellington, May 2004 – May 2005. In collaboration with Alison Hadfield and Carly Hall, Archives New Zealand.

© Nursing Praxis - ISSN 0112-7438

Nursing Praxis distribution is bound by international Copyright laws.
Subscribers may print one copy for personal use only.
Citations - please use the reference details at the bottom of the first
page of each article. For permission to print or distribute multiple
copies of articles by any method, see our website for details.

www.nursingpraxis.org

Table 1. Basic information about historical research methodology

Key terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Historiography. * Primary source and secondary source. * Internal criticism (reliability) & external criticism (validity).
Paradigmatic approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Interpretive – usually interpretations of qualitative historical material. * Positivism – may use quantitative data and methods. * Radical/critical and post-structural.
Origins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Originated with the first society to record its history. * As the emphasis is on recording in writing, the term ‘prehistoric’ indicates societies without a written history, though they may well have told their history in oral stories.
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * To relate interpretations of the past. * To deconstruct the past, e.g. myths.
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * To identify, select and interpret historical sources. * To create historical sources for later interpretation (as in the generation of taped interviews for an oral history archive).
Research question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * How might we interpret what happened in the past? * What were the continuities and changes over time? * What were the origins of ...?
Sampling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * A reasonable coverage of documentary material selected from a reasonable range of primary source archives. * For oral history, a purposive sampling of key informants.
Data Collection Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Note-taking from archival documents, either by hand or on computer. * Unstructured or semi-structured interviews in oral history or life history projects. * Development of a database for large amounts of quantitative data from historical sources.
Analytical strategies (systematic and procedure-oriented processes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Interpretive analysis of documentary sources for changes and continuities within time period. * Interpretive or critical analysis of information obtained in oral history or life history interviews. * Quantitative or comparative analysis processes. * Use of theoretical lenses, e.g. Foucauldian or feminist.