

# The role of sociology in the nursing curriculum

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The context of nursing is changing and the demands made upon nurses are increasing. Students of nursing may well feel that their schools and colleges are insisting that they learn more and more about an increasing number of subjects all of which have relevance to the health and illness of individuals and communities.

Sociology is just one of the disciplines claiming the time and attention of today's nursing students. Compared with most other new subjects it involves a break away from the traditional preparation for nursing which was based on studies that focussed on a detailed study of the human body and on clinical or procedural aspects of patient care. Many nursing students may therefore ask 'why do we need sociology?' The answer lies in the distinctive alternative view that the subject offers. Its focus is not on the individual per se: it is on the two-way relationship between the individual and society. Sociology as applied to nursing is concerned specifically with those aspects of the relationship which affect and influence the experiences of health and illness in individuals, and in the response that these experiences provoke in others.

Human beings are social animals, and need to feel accepted in the family and the community at large. From the moment of our birth until the time of our death we are members of a particular culture from which we learn language, a moral code and beliefs, and a way of interpreting and understanding the

wider society. These influences help to shape individuals into the kind of person they will become, and will affect the ways in which they behave and react. Health care is not provided in a social vacuum, and the subject matter of sociology provides an insight into the social settings of patients and into the social causes of disease and ill-health. The ways in which a society deals with the major events of birth, illness and death are central to the beliefs and practices of that society, and bear a close relationship to its other major social, economic and cultural institutions.

In order to be successful in providing health care in a range of groups and settings, nurses need an understanding of the beliefs and practices associated with health and healing as well as the social processes underlying them. The traditional, or biomedical model, which reduces illness to a biological abnormality within the body, has failed to find the cause, or to provide an explanation, of a large number of conditions. It is now generally accepted that there are many aspects of human functioning that fall outside its analysis and methods of diagnosis. Sociology seeks to redress the balance by describing various ways in which the social world relates to illness, and by examining how socially determined factors such as marital status, social class and family life influence the pattern of morbidity and mortality. Traditional nursing knowledge, based on the biomedical model of what constitutes mental or physical



illness, is not necessarily shared by the people that nurses seek to serve, and this absence of shared meanings and perceptions may frustrate many nursing interventions. As professionals nurses need to be seen as effective in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities in the social situations in which they practise their profession. In order to respond appropriately it is therefore necessary for them to have as much information as possible about the various factors affecting each patient's situation. As an understanding of sociology is fundamental to a deeper understanding of society, it forms an important basis for the development of professional knowledge.

Many students see sociology as taking as its subject matter topics with which they are already familiar. But the statements made by sociologists differ from 'commonsense' knowledge because they are subjected to more rigorous testing and critical evaluation. In this way sociology challenges taken-for-granted assumptions through research-based knowledge which is constantly being added to and updated. Among the issues that are especially relevant to nurses are those that add to an understanding of the social context of health and disease. An in-depth study of the variety and complexity of family life, for example, may be a means of sensitising nursing students to facts and issues well beyond any commonsense view and thus enable them to provide patients and carers with the practical and emotional support that they so often need in times of illness or bereavement.

Another important reason for including sociology in the nursing curriculum is its emphasis on health, or normality, as a starting point for study, rather than ill-health and disease. The approach of this social model of health is to emphasise the promotion of health, rehabilitation and the social management of illness, rather than the biological and institutional aspects of the medical model. It also provides a framework for and analysis of how social processes operate in defining illness, in understanding the causes of illness, or in interpreting the organizational structures within the health care system.

Sociological analysis has also made a major contribution to exposing inequalities in health care provision. Lower social class is seen, for example, to be a characteristic of people who are at greater risk of becoming ill. It is not seen as being a **cause** of ill-health, and by illuminating the characteristics that constitute our complex social class system the real causes of inequality in health can be better understood. This kind of social knowledge is important as it will assist professional nurses to seek explanations for such inequalities, and to make a contribution to their reduction by adopting positive, problem-solving approaches when considering the problems faced by disadvantaged patients and clients.

Central to a sociological understanding is the idea that all human actions are socially constructed. Old age is an example of one such category defined by society. The importance of the concept of social construction is shown by the way in which being placed in such category



can impinge on the quality of life for the elderly. Other social categories include the homeless, the unemployed, some minority groups and the disabled, all of whom may face prejudice when trying to improve their health status, or when seeking medical care.

Without sociological theory providing particular sociological perspectives, it is almost impossible for nurses to comprehend the basis and assumptions of much important research into health care. A study of sociology is therefore essential for the student to develop a disciplined and systematic approach to reading, criticising and practising research. It will provide them with a range of perspectives and approaches to choose from, as well as an ability to use a variety of methods and techniques. The subject thus encourages the student to ask different kinds of questions and to examine data from a more fruitful perspective.

For all these reasons it is therefore now widely accepted that sociology is

an important part of the preparation of future nurses. The relevance of the theories and concepts developed by sociologists are acknowledged as illuminating aspects of human experience in both health and sickness, and the methods used in exploring and explaining group behaviour are seen as necessary for broadening the students' basic understanding of the social context of health and disease, and of the social determinants underlying nursing and medical practice.

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