Epistemology

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\textbf{Background.} Although investigators have long examined historical nursing phenomena, there remain significant tensions and obstacles related to the legitimacy of doing so as a method for generating nursing knowledge.

\textbf{Purpose.} The purpose of this philosophical paper is to examine the nature of historical inquiry as an epistemological strategy within the practice discipline of nursing. Can historical research generate nursing knowledge?

\textbf{Methods.} I trace the development of historical inquiry in conjunction with nursing’s epistemological commitments, paying specific attention to the nature of nursing knowledge as it is accepted today; the nature of historical inquiry; and the avenues where nursing and history epistemologically intersect.

\textbf{Findings.} I contend that historical inquiry occupies a precarious position as a legitimate knowledge-generating strategy in nursing due to the long-standing condition that requires nursing knowledge to be action-oriented; a lingering reputation for faulty historical scholarship in nursing; and internal and external professional marginalization. I propose that historical inquiry can nevertheless achieve stability in nursing epistemology. I argue that, like philosophy, history allows nurses to consider question that cannot be addressed by strictly empirical (or philosophical) means. I posit that history, though largely recognized as contextual and interpretive, is essentially an empirical endeavor that can provide evidence for practice according to current conceptualizations of evidence in nursing.

\textbf{Implications.} As it enables nurses to consider a wider range of questions, bolstering history’s epistemological status ultimately benefits the discipline on both theoretical and practical levels.