

Fishing for Foucault



Philosopher Michel Foucault is widely quoted in academic nursing papers, but do we really understand him? **Daniel Allen** went on a mission to find out more about the man and his relevance to nursing

Day one

Nursing Standard calls. Would I write an article on Foucault and his relevance to nursing? No problem. Put the phone down. Who is Foucault? Did I do him when I was a sociology undergraduate? I write down everything I can remember. List reads: 'Foucault was French.'

Day two

Buy *Introducing Foucault*. Page one: as a boy Foucault 'wanted to be a goldfish'. Hmm. He was also a 'philosopher, historian, political activist, bestseller, tireless campaigner for dissident causes and leather queen'. Leather queen? No mention of nursing.

Day three

I need help. Internet leads me to Clare O'Farrell at the Queensland University of Technology who runs a site on Foucault. She has also written books about the man, attended lectures by him and interviewed him. An expert. Email her asking if I can put a few simple questions to her. Realise later this is like asking Stephen Hawking if he knows the time.

Day four

Clare responds: happy to help. I am still struggling with Foucault the man – or goldfish – never mind his ideas, so ask her how she would describe him if she met him at a party. 'I would be impressed by his extreme intelligence and his facility at

answering the most difficult of questions clearly and logically. I would also be struck by his punctilious but somewhat distancing politeness and his avid curiosity about ideas and events around him.'

Day five

Amazing. Local library has a copy of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. Also *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Philosophy*, which depicts Foucault's method thus: 'He described his work as "archaeology" of knowledge. By analysing old writings, he tried to "dig up" how knowledge took shape during other moments in history.'

So *Madness and Civilization*, which charts the history of madness from 1500 to 1800, is an example of this? I ask Clare O'Farrell for a quick summary. '*Madness and Civilization* deals with the economic, institutional, medical, philosophical, ethical, political, artistic and literary practices which helped define madness as a cultural and social category and as an object of science and knowledge. Foucault shows that the ways madness has been viewed and mad people have been

treated have varied considerably in Western history, but not in the sense of a relentless progress from ignorance to science.'

Day six

Not really any nearer placing Foucault in a nursing context. Email Alec Grant, principal lecturer at the Institute of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Brighton, and ask him to give me the essence of Foucault in a sentence. He replies: 'Foucault's work constantly disrupts the idea of a "natural" and "correct" way of looking at the world, and our place in it.' And how does Foucault influence nurses? In criticisms of 'evidence-based' practice, says Alec.

I ask his colleague, Liam Clarke, principal lecturer in mental health, for his view. He is more dismissive. 'Foucault's discourse on madness might be of theoretical significance to mental health nurses, and his opposition to the notion of grand or standard "truths" – for example, scientific truth

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– is manna from heaven for certain types of qualitative researchers: all nursing qualitative researchers mention him.'

Ask them both for marks out of ten for Foucault. Alec: 'I would give Foucault full marks. He helps us challenge that which is taken for granted.' Liam's email says: 'Eight out of ten. He provides no definitive answers on the wide range of topics he covers. But he is provocative – as well as contradictory: the latter quality would probably provoke distaste among British nurses. Very flash – and not for the plodding academic who on this side of the Channel would want to LOOK FOR THE EVIDENCE!' Capital letters? This must be significant.

Day seven

Review progress. Foucault is a philosopher who uses history to provide insight into human experience and social interaction with a view to inviting people to change the ingrained status quo. Sadly, not my words but Clare O'Farrell's. For me, defining the man and his ideas is like pushing toothpaste back into the tube. Still unclear what Foucault could possibly mean to me if I was slaving away in a hectic hospital and preferred *Hello!* magazine to Foucault on my days off. Would I be missing anything? I put my erudite question to Ms O'Farrell. 'Yes and no,' she replies.

'If you are not happy with your situation, an appreciation of Foucault's ideas might give you a wide general perspective and understanding that your situation is not unique and that the structures in place are not the only or necessarily the best ones. One can then go forward to imagine and enact even tiny changes that would improve things on a day-to-day basis.'

'On the other hand, reading Foucault is difficult!' That's true.

I put it to Alex Grant that Foucault is for academics. But he says: 'Foucault is for everyone. He argues that we are all caught up in structures of power, whether we like it or not.'

Day eight

Find an article called 'Postmodern nursing' by an American journalist called Sarah Glazer. She has written a lot about 'snake-oil remedies', which she says nurses have embraced. Or rather some have. Others have gone strictly down the 'science' road. But, she says, both paths represent attempts by nurses to seek 'a professional identity that would distinguish them from doctors yet provide equal status'.

For the anti-science faction, 'evidence-based practice' has become a codeword 'for all that is evil, patriarchal and insensitive about modern science and modern medicine'. Foucault, says Sarah, has a lot to answer for. 'Foucault's argument that claims to knowledge by experts in fields like medicine are actually claims to power

fits perfectly into the view many nurses have of doctors as pompous bullies who devalue nurses' bedside experience.' Wow.

Day nine

Still reflecting on Sarah Glazer's article. It seems that if you buy all that evidence-based stuff, you and Foucault are enemies. Yet if you think health care is about more than people as pie-charts then he will turn you into a witch. I ask Len Bowers, professor of psychiatric nursing at London's City University, what he thinks. 'I am not a great Foucault fan,' he says. 'I think he writes in a deliberately mystifying way that is often without any real discernible content. His writing is also aesthetic and beautiful – like prose poetry. These two aspects coupled together make it very seductive to some, perhaps especially as his writing harmonises with an inner confusion and the desire for an obscure, delicate and complex truth on the part of the reader.'

I like that – an 'obscure, delicate, complex truth'. Is that why some nurses like Foucault? It would fit with Sarah's ideas about 'professional identity'. I contact every academic I know to glean more views. Some do not reply. Others admit ignorance. 'Yikes,' says one. 'I am not the man for this.' Foucault frightens people.

Day ten

A man with no fear is Neil Small, professor of community and primary care at Bradford University. I ask him to explain more about Foucault and power. This feels more important than the snake-oil-or-science debate. 'For Foucault power is located in the day-to-day practices of workers,' says Neil. 'It is something local, dispersed and often hidden in specific practices. It is not something best understood as residing in state apparatus, in big and distant systems. It exists in the things doctors do, social workers do, nurses do to shape the actions of others such that they act, and believe they must act, in particular ways.' I like this. Go on.

'Power exists in the spaces between individuals and runs, like water over stones, through mundane activities and everyday routines.' But how does this translate to a hospital?

'Such an institution disciplines individuals and exercises surveillance over their lives so that it produces and reinforces actions that are consistent with its view of what is normal in everyday life. But it does not do this in a conventional authoritarian sense by imposing crudely a view of what should be done. Rather it shapes a sense of what is normal and acceptable and this sense is shared by all – staff and patients. People are controlled but willingly play a part in their own control. But controlling people in this way is difficult, not least because of the many individual circumstances and specific challenges. In such

Reading and resources

Further reading

Glazer S (2002) *Postmodern Nursing*. www.thepublicinterest.com/archives/2000summer/article1.html

Horrocks C, Jevtic Z (1999) *Introducing Foucault*. Cambridge, Icon Books.

Stevenson J (2002) *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Philosophy*. Indianapolis, Alpha.

Recommended resources

Clare O'farrell:

Rabinow P (1984) *The Foucault Reader*. Penguin, Harmondsworth.

Foucault Resources <http://www.foucault.qut.edu.au>

Foucault.info <http://www.foucault.info>

Foucault a www.theory.org.uk/ctr-fouc.htm

Alec Grant:

Boyle M (2000) Diagnosis, science and power. In Barker P, Stevenson C (Eds) *The Construction of Power and Authority in Psychiatry*. Oxford, Butterworth-Heinemann.

Liam Clarke:

Mills S (2003) *Michel Foucault*. London, Routledge.

situations people can reflect on what they need to do and what they believe they are supposed to do.' Allowing them some resistance and a chance to try new things, right?

Day 11

Deadline day minus one. Gulp. What have I learned?

- Foucault's central mission: exploring knowledge and power in the human sciences.
- History helps interpret the present.
- He divides nurses into qualitative/quantitative camps.
- But that is too easy; think of him more in terms of human experience and social interaction.
- If you feel oppressed, insignificant, small, Foucault may help.

Day 12

Back to Clare O'Farrell. Ask her to summarise Foucault's message to nurses. 'Through the rigorous examination of history we can see that the present situation in any domain is not set in stone and is merely the product of a whole collection of actions and decisions made by many people over a long period of time. Things have not always been as they are now and can be changed even at the most mundane and seemingly insignificant levels so that they eventually become different tomorrow.'

I think that is a powerful message 

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