



Let's talk about society: A Critical Discourse Analysis of sociology courses in pre-registration nursing



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 9 September 2015

Keywords:
Chile
Pre-registration nursing
Sociology
Syllabus
Critical Discourse Analysis

SUMMARY

Background: The discussion of teaching and learning in nursing has been prolific. Whereas most of the debate tends to focus on core contents of nursing programmes, little has been discussed about the teaching in 'supporting subjects' with relevance to both nursing education and nursing practice. This article offers a perspective on sociology scholarship for applied professions by using the case of nursing programmes.

Methodology: Syllabus is a rich source of data, and in its representational capacity it becomes both a discursive construction and a vehicle of ideology. Accordingly, we present a Critical Discourse Analysis of syllabi of nursing schools in Chile as to identify core contents and ideologies, and implied challenges for nursing education.

Findings and discussion: We argue that while the syllabus as a discourse discloses a significant cleavage, the biggest challenge is precisely to challenge the ideologies constructed by and embedded in the syllabi. Our reflection thus points to a better interdisciplinary dialogue as to enhance the actual contribution of sociology to nursing.

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Introduction

Being an educator may be rewarding, but the reward may not come altogether easily. This is so much so when teaching supporting subjects to those who are not meant to become specialists. This article focuses on the case of sociology courses in pre-registration nursing, arising from the following questioning: To what extent is social theory relevant to nursing? Should indeed nurses learn sociology? If so, what scholarship is worth being taught to them? How to decide what to put in, what to leave out? In what ways do the contents contribute substantially to gaining an understanding relevant to the care provided by nurses and to the profession itself? While these questions may echo concerns of teaching sociologists, serving nursing schools and of educational planners in nursing, little has been discussed about the challenges of matching the best interest of the profession with the potential embedded in other disciplines. This article originates in collaborative reflection on the practice of teaching sociology to nursing students in different universities and in becoming active in debates throughout the evolution of higher education in Chile.

Over the past two decades, there has been a concerted debate concerning the usefulness of teaching sociology in nursing schools and

whether the subject is pertinent to the pre-registration nursing curriculum. On the one hand, it has been argued that learning sociology may increase awareness on and sensitivity to the social realities of healthcare users and therefore would enhance the effectiveness of the care provided by nurses (Cooke, 1993; Porter, 1996; Allen, 2001; Pinikahana, 2003; McPherson, 2008). On the other hand, claims on an alleged inapplicability of social theory in nurses' core occupational activity – on the grounds of sociology's heterogeneous range of epistemological and methodological stances – have raised issues of its actual suitability and value (Sharp, 1994, 1995). While this debate might seem passé for nursing scholars, it coincided with a revival of the discussion among teaching sociologists about the nature and purpose of sociological instruction, and the growth of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in sociology into maturity (Chin, 2002; Albers, 2003; Grauerholz and Gibson, 2006; Pfeiffer and Syed, 2007). This revival led us to revise the sociological scholarship being taught in nursing and analyse its contents more closely, rather than just using the question of whether nurses should learn sociology.

We draw upon institutional documents, largely focusing on the syllabi of introductory courses on sociology adapted to university-based nurse education, aiming at critically analysing (Fairclough, 2013) the purpose and content of such courses as offered to nursing schools. Syllabus analysis is helpful to identify core contents, values and goals which are considered important for a given educational outcome and the sequence in which they should be addressed (Matejke and Kurke, 1994; Albers, 2003), and, more importantly, to uncover voices and perspectives embedded in educational practices

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as well as the eventual existence of a reading canon consolidating a common body of knowledge (Fan, 2013). Even though syllabus cannot provide the entire picture of how education unfolds in the classroom, it is a map of what scholars agree on, and as such it becomes an ideological vehicle.

The article begins with an overview of the inclusion of sociology courses in the nursing curriculum in Chile, and then presents the methodology and main findings of a critical discourse analysis, in light of recent developments concerning the nursing profession.

The discourse discloses a significant cleavage where the biggest challenge is precisely to challenge the ideologies constructed by and embedded in the syllabi. While this finding highlights the challenges of teaching sociology to nurses, we invite readers to a discussion about the extent to which social theory might be useful as an auxiliary discipline in nursing.

Bringing Sociology to Nursing Training

Early in the twentieth century, Chilean nurses began to study sociology. The University of Chile School of Nursing, the only university-based nursing school at the time, offered after-graduation training to become a sanitary nurse, in which an introductory course of sociology was included. This fact can be considered as a turning point in higher education, as sociology as a discipline was still rather unknown in Chile. It is not until the late 1950s that sociology had become an established profession (Brunner, 1988).

What at first sight would seem a result of social and political circumstances that the country witnessed at that time – namely, social activism seeking welfare rights – the impulse of including sociology in the nursing training was ought to a scholarship programme launched in the interwar period and founded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Through this programme, nursing scholars would soon access specialised training in nurse education in the United States and Canada, by which time sociology had developed for around a century time frame in North America (Drysdale and Hoecker-Drysdale, 2007). The resonance of the exchange programme in several health disciplines was such that, in spite of its mentoring spirit, resulted in a dependency of and aspiration towards the Anglo-Saxon model of professional development and professional education (Evetts, 2013). The influence of that exchange programme is understood today as the rise of cultural expansionism promoted by philanthropy programmes (Solórzano, 1996; Parmar, 2012).

It is a returning grantee who revises and enhances the sanitary-nurse curriculum in 1944, adding sociology as one of the newer subjects, which would be soon after integrated in the pre-registration path (Flores, 1965). Interestingly, the evolution of the nursing curriculum – which has import for the present analysis – was informed by an internal ideological debate in the 1960s, addressing the nature and end of the nursing occupation, whose ‘professionhood’ was still questioned in North America (Bixler and Bixler, 1959). Chilean nurses subsequently aimed at strengthening the foundations of their discipline, stressing notions such as ‘scientific reasoning,’ ‘critical thinking’ and ‘autonomy’ (Flores, 1965), seeing in the social sciences an auxiliary means with which to complement their training in natural sciences and humanities. Along with the model of profession adopted by Chilean nurses, this piece of information suggests an ideological end behind their early interest in sociology.

Extrinsic forces then reinforced the amalgamation of the curriculum into a more comprehensive plane. Ardent social movements in the late 1960s would eventually raise questions concerning ‘the society,’ which in turn informed discussions about nursing practice, as stated in historical documents:

“Nursing students must be sensitive to changes in society, thinking of it critically and modifying its behavioural patterns” [...] (University of Chile at Valparaíso School of Nursing, 1969).

“The man, subject of care, is a bio-psycho-social entity. Nurses’ actions must cover his local community, bearing in mind the reality and the health problems faced by the community and the nation” (University of Chile at Valparaíso School of Nursing, 1970).

These passages reflect discussions in university circles concerning social activism and the difficulties for governments in developing social welfare.

While this historical backdrop is relevant for the understanding of the adoption of a sociologically oriented training for twentieth-century nurses, the position and function of social theory today remains unclear. Sociological instruction in fact seems to be ‘hanging on by its fingernails’ in an increasing number of nursing schools, following disagreements among faculty nurses. At this point, our initial questioning becomes meaningful to gain insights into the challenges faced by both nursing students learning sociology and teaching sociologists serving outside their disciplinary borders.

The Syllabus as a Source of Information

Syllabus is considered to be a rich source of data, not only as a planning document, but also as a way of representing the scholarship of teaching and learning (Albers, 2003). It functions as a vehicle for presenting knowledge as a coherent whole and for making it accessible to particular students. It is this ‘representational capacity’ (Albers, 2003) that enables approaching the syllabus as a discursive construction. Analysing syllabi thus becomes an appropriate way to approach our questions of concern.

The Study

Aim

The aim of this study was to discuss critically the purpose and content of university courses on sociology aimed at a non-specialist audience and the problems for teaching sociologists arising from it.

Design

The sociology syllabi of university-based nursing schools were included – it is important to notice that all courses on sociology offered by nursing schools are introductory. We aimed at covering a range of universities in the assumption that their institutional worldviews may lead to devoting teaching to different theory bodies; this assumption was crucial for our way of approaching the data analysis. Our sampling model provided a three-layered approach (Table 1) as to include purposefully seminal universities (oldest), public-oriented universities (non-profit corporations aimed at increasing coverage of higher education) and private-paid universities (newer), although all the study programmes seemed to derive from a common precursor. Most universities are based in the three most populated regions (Greater Santiago, Valparaíso, and Biobío), and we focused the sample on those regions aiming at covering institutions which have led influential political and historical processes in the course of the higher education system. Important from a historical and geographical point of view, our sampling

Table 1
Three-layered sample of syllabi.

	Total of universities offering nursing training in the three regions	Nursing programmes that include sociology courses	Syllabi subjected to analysis
Foundational	3	2	2 (100%)
Public-oriented	7	5	5 (100%)
Private-paid	13	9	3 (33%) ^a
	23	16	10

^a The missing syllabi correspond to the schools that did not respond.

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