

Book Review

The Complexities of Care: Nursing Reconsidered

Edited by Sioban Nelson and Suzanne Gordon
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Caring is likely the feature of nursing that is most strongly evoked by both providers and recipients of nursing services. A large proportion of nurses would likely say that they chose nursing as a career because they wanted to care. Indeed, a significant body of scholarly literature has articulated theoretical frameworks, clinical accounts, and research evidence relating caring to important patient and family outcomes.

However, a counter-literature has been pointing to the perils of nursing's commitment to a caring discourse. Some feminist analyses have argued that this characterization of nurses — and women, for that matter — perpetuates a longstanding societal expectation of self-sacrifice in service to the interests of others (without recognition and compensation).

The Complexities of Care: Nursing Reconsidered, edited by Sioban Nelson and Suzanne Gordon, makes an important contribution to this debate. The principal aim of the book is to demonstrate that nursing's emphasis on the virtuousness of caring and of the profession, rather than on the complex knowledge and concrete contributions that nurses make on a daily basis, has unintended consequences. The book examines the interaction among caring discourse, nursing practice, and the economic and political environment of nursing in order to show how nursing's "virtue script," in the context of less time for caring work, perpetrates the invisibility of nursing's sophisticated technological work. Nurses believe they are failing because they are unable to provide the caring that they and others expect — disregarding their extraordinary "body work" with its significant impact on patient outcomes.

The works collected in this volume are persuasive, drawing on a variety of scholarly disciplines. Nelson has already made numerous contributions through her critical historical studies of nursing, while Gordon is an award-winning journalist recognized for her examination of how nursing work is portrayed.

The first chapter, authored by Nelson and Gordon, examines the power of nursing's virtue script, which has historically served to senti-

mentalize and trivialize complex work, thus undermining the profession's recruitment strategies. In chapter 2, the sociologist Dana Weinberg analyzes the breakdown of nursing at Boston's Beth Israel Hospital, whose nursing department was one of the most acclaimed in the United States. Weinberg shows how allegiance to a narrow caring discourse — which was not greatly valued by the hospital's administration — served to disable the nursing department's defence of its highly effective services.

Next, Diana Mason, Editor-in-Chief of the *American Journal of Nursing* discusses how nursing has systematically conveyed a particular image of itself. She demonstrates that nurses have vigorously resisted attempts to portray the grittier, less virtuous side of nursing. In chapter 4, the philosopher Lydia Moland highlights the moral dilemmas that emerge when nurses are unable to reconcile their caring values with the tough demands of their daily work.

In the fifth chapter, Sioban Nelson challenges the “equating” of ethical expertise with clinical expertise by scholars such as Patricia Benner. For Nelson, this conflation of ethical and clinical expertise blurs our understanding of nursing work and the significant influence that contextual factors exert on nursing practice, emphasizing nurses' idealistic accounts of what they (ought to) do rather than how they actually manage patient problems in complex, frequently confounding, clinical realities. In the succeeding chapter, the British nursing scholar Tom Keighley discusses the ways in which nursing “health” discourses obscure the daunting challenges involved in caring for sick and vulnerable patients.

In chapter 7, the other co-editor of *The Complexities of Care*, Suzanne Gordon, examines nursing's commitment to “holism.” Gordon points out that the nursing dialogue on holism conceals the broad range of medical, technical, and emotional expertise that is involved in everyday nursing practice. Two Australian nursing researchers, Sanchia Aranda and Rosie Brown, raise concerns in chapter 8 about the shift in palliative care nursing from the role of caregiver to that of case manager. They assert that this shift will erode nurses' sophisticated clinical assessment skills as well as their important role as mentors to other care providers.

In chapter 9, the Australian nursing scholar Marie Heartfield discusses shifts in nursing work on short-stay units. She argues that nurses are required to practise in an uncaring manner because of the restructuring of certain services without a corresponding re-examination of nurses' commitment to caring. In chapter 10, the nursing-workforce researcher Sean Clarke examines key epistemological and methodological questions about nursing work. Pointing to landmark research demonstrating that nursing staffing levels affect patient outcomes, Clarke reveals just how little is known about what nurses actually do and how they do it. In the

final chapter, the editors call on the profession to acknowledge the complex abilities involved in nursing and to demonstrate to society their significance for patient safety and outcomes.

This book makes a truly valuable contribution to our examination of the epistemological foundations of nursing. A wide range of sources and analyses are drawn together to highlight a consistent thesis: the construal of nursing as primarily and sometimes exclusively caring work belies the complexity of other realms of nursing practice that could contribute significantly to the well-being not only of patients but of nursing itself.

This collection of articles is so exceptional that I raise only one point of criticism. *The Complexities of Care* tends to treat caring and body work dichotomously, thus setting up a debate between the proponents of moral virtue and those of technical proficiency. I agree with the authors that this dichotomy is congruent with modern Western thinking, whereby exceptional practitioners are commonly judged as possessing *either* a virtuous character *or* excellent technical skills, never both. However, I propose that future work in this area consider recent work in *virtue ethics*, drawing on Aristotle's conception of virtue: the features of a *virtuoso* in the classical sense cannot be reduced to one's character or to one's technical skills. I believe that some contemporary proponents of nursing excellence in terms of a moral discourse, such as Benner, are not suggesting that caring should trump technical mastery but, rather, are calling for a recognition of the moral commitments that underlie complex technical care (as well as the sophisticated expertise involved in caring) — these are irreducible in a complete representation of nursing excellence.

This book is a call for rethinking and action on the part of nursing scholars, educators, researchers, administrators, and clinicians.

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