

Foreword

Nursing is vital to millions of people worldwide. This book details the ebb and flow of its fascinating history and politics through case studies from Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Authors from across the Americas shared findings and explored new thinking about Western hemispheric-specific issues that affect nursing and health care. Using economic globalization as an overarching framework these cross-national case studies show the strengths and contradictions in nursing, elucidating common themes and examining successes. The partnership of authors shapes a collective understanding of nursing in the Americas and forms a basis for enduring hemispheric-wide academic exchange. Thus, the book offers a new platform for understanding the struggles and obstacles of nursing in a climate of globalization, as well as for understanding nursing's richness and accomplishments. Because politics, economics, health and nursing are inextricably linked, this volume critically explores the intersections among political economies and nursing and health care systems. The historical and contextual background allows readers to make sense of how and why nursing in the Americas has taken on its present form.

Preface

Merrill Singer

This book is exceptional in a number of different ways. Nurses are the largest group of health care providers within the broad domain of biomedicine and one that is absolutely vital to its functioning locally, regionally, and globally. Nursing immediately impacts people's lives by shaping the quality of health care that patients receive. As anyone who has ever been in hospital or been the recipient of home care knows from personal experience, in response to the uncertainty of illness and the fear and vulnerability that it invokes for patients and their families, the role played by nurses in both recovery and coping with chronic symptoms is profound. Yet, as Karen Breda, a leader in the social science of nursing, aptly comments in the opening chapter of this edited volume, although much ink is spilled in the analysis of biomedicine—concerning its nature, function, impact, and social position—with only a relatively small number of exceptions, “nursing as a discrete entity is rarely [a] topic of study” (p. 5). Most books about nursing are by nurses and they are for nurses. Many are practical, some explore the underlying philosophy of nursing, most have an educational mission, but few are theoretically driven analyses of the practice of nursing in varied social contexts. This book is an exception to this pattern. The analytic perspective that the authors bring to their task is critical political economic theory, the framework historically derived from the work of Marx and Engels that draws attention to the fundamental importance of the exercise of power and structures of inequality in social process. More precisely, the book is framed by and its chapters organized around the perspective of world systems theory, as informed by anthropological attention to on-the-ground local diversity. This provides the book with a balanced approach that draws attention to the unique aspects and histories of local social worlds while attending to the ways cross-cutting forces like commodification, the global market and profit-seeking, the neoliberal restructuring policies pushed by international lending and governing institutions

(e.g., privatization of health care), and strategies of capitalist labor control transcend separable national cases. In other words, this book brings social science insight to understanding the intricacies of unique local histories and social configurations of nursing in the countries of Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, and the United States, while never losing sight of the fact that nursing in all of these places is impacted by common global changes and social and economic processes.

Notably, physicians don't write books about nursing. They do, however, write volumes about the nature of doctoring and the experience of being a physician. While the authors of such books may seek to address and influence those in the process of becoming doctors, many physicians who write books about doctoring have a broader audience in mind than just those relatively small number of individuals who will ever have M.D. inscribed after their names. What doctors know and experience, it is assumed, is of interest to everyone. This is not generally assumed about nursing. A purpose of this book, and a second way in which it is exceptional, is that it seeks to speak to a broad audience—one that includes but extends beyond those directly involved in the discipline—about the nature of nursing, as a domain of work that has struggled in multiple local contexts to overcome common structural challenges, including subordinate social status within an evolving and globalizing biomedical health care system, underpayment for increasingly professional labor, and poor and increasingly deteriorating working conditions. In this, an aim of this book is to make nursing an essential arena for understanding our changing world.

Like physicians, health and other social scientists (except those who are themselves nurses) also infrequently write books about nurses. They do, however, routinely write books about physicians and about other kinds of healers. Herein lies the dilemma of nursing from a scholarly perspective. While, as noted, nurses are undeniably central to the functioning of Biomedicine everywhere (a day without nurses would be a day without Biomedicine), at least within the bibliography of the social science of health, they are somewhat invisible. Like those who fill other social roles that are vital but which we take for granted, they are hidden in plain sight. To the degree that nursing has come to the attention of social scientists, there has been, as the book stresses, a tendency to under analyze it by narrowly viewing nurses relative to their subordination to doctors (often seen as a playing out of more general gender inequalities) and nursing as a field as a compliant handmaiden to biomedical hegemony. Avoiding this kind of reductionism too is a final way in which *Nursing and Globalization in the Americas: A Critical Perspective* is an exceptional book. Its focus is the critical social scientific analysis of nursing as a type of labor in cross-cultural and historic contexts. Its intention is to significantly expand social science understanding of nursing, but, also, the nature of Biomedicine generally by “unhiding” nursing. The book's focus, as its title indicates, is only on a part of the wide world of nursing, the Americas, the sector of the world system that is most immediately under the political, economic, and medical influence of the United States. The reason for this narrowing of the investigative lens is to increase analytic precision, while facilitating communication among the book's contributors, and avoiding some of the complexities and page length needed for a volume that was fully global in its scope. As a result, the book elevates to a

historically appropriate level a vast, complex, and intriguing region that often, relative to the United States, has been as obscured as nurses have been to doctors.

While the explanations might differ, there is a broad agreement that health care is in crisis. Most notably, even in the wealthiest country in the Americas, the United States (but not, by contrast, in Canada), a huge percentage of the population, most notably the poor and working classes, lack health insurance and hence good access to quality health care. In many of the countries of Latin America, economic inequality and structural adjustment policies have combined to make health care a consequential arena of social disparity. Moreover, health care costs have increased dramatically, further distancing the poor and working people from the kinds of health care available to wealthier social strata within and across countries. Further, nursing shortages have become common in many countries. Simmi Singh, a well-known health care information specialist, has written of a nurse friend who likes to joke that there are no Irish nurses left in Dublin because they are all in Boston, and no Filipino nurses left in Manila because they are all in Dublin. Labor pools within the healthcare professions, including nursing, have become global in nature, with a medical brain (and skill) drain producing a diaspora of health care professionals. In this light, a final message of this book concerns the future of nursing and the role of nurses in creating and improving the future of health care in the Americas. Simply put, to borrow an old saw about generals and war, health care is far too important to be left to economists, private insurance companies, the pharmaceutical industry, hospitals, or even doctors to decide. Moving quality health care from a privilege of the few to the right of all will require the participation of nurses within the communities they serve.