Historical research is categorized as a qualitative research method. While it cannot directly affect “evidence-based” practice, historical accounts can provide the basis for answering the question: “why do we do it this way?” Studying nurses and nursing practice of the past elucidates and clarifies rationales for present practice and can, at its best, set a tone and direction for the future.

Many definitions of historical method exist. In nursing, Austin (1958) who could be considered the mother of nursing history, gives us this one: “an integrated, written record of past events based on the results of a search for truth” (p.11). It is the search for truth that makes this a scientific method. As such, there are rules, procedures and commonly accepted measures that need to be adhered to in order to consider the results of the research rigorous. Historical method is not unique to nursing and crosses many disciplines. The classic text that outlines the rules of “historiography” (another way of saying, the study of history) is Barzun and Graff (1985) *The Modern Researcher*. A well crafted historical account accomplishes two things: first, it clarifies past events in light of what is known today, and second—if well written—it tells a good “once upon a time” story. This last can be done effectively without loss of integrity to the truth by following the rules.

Two schools of thought or traditions in the study of history have been identified. The positivist or neo-positivist, which while still a qualitative approach, takes a more quantitative posture, reducing history to “universal laws”. Positivist researchers seek to extract cause and effect relationships. The idealist school that represents more closely the values of qualitative research, lends itself better to both nursing and feminist historical inquiry. Qualitative approaches attempt to extract meaning from an event. Personal letters, diaries and oral histories frequently serve as the most prevalent primary sources.

A primary source is one that gives a first hand account of a person’s experience, an institution or an event. It may, however, lack critical analysis. In the study of women’s history—and historically nursing has been explained from a woman’s perspective—primary sources have used personal letters, journals, oral histories rather than official accounts of events. There are some notable exceptions and secondary sources are used to corroborate and extend knowledge. A secondary source is written by people not directly involved in an event and may cite opinions and present interpretations. Newspaper accounts, journal articles and textbooks from the period under study are secondary sources. These sources may also serve to give the historian a better understanding of the context of the event, the zeitgeist or spirit of the age under study. Whether primary or secondary, the obligation of the historical researcher is to confirm the genuineness and authenticity of the source.

Just as validity and reliability have specific meanings in the context of quantitative research, so do authenticity and genuineness in historiography (the study of history). Establishing authenticity, or external criticism, requires several operations although not fixed in a specific technique. If authentic, a document provides a truthful recording of the subject. Genuineness means the document is not forged. Genuineness is also known as internal criticism, and refers to an evaluation of the worth of the evidence. Genuineness and authenticity are requirements regardless of the theoretical framework chosen.
There are three theoretical frameworks that structure historical research appropriate to nursing research. They are biographical, social, and intellectual historical. In biographical historical research, the researcher uses the story of a single person’s life to understand the context of the culture—the values, expectations, tensions and conflict—for the time in which that person lived. Social historians explore a particular period to understand the prevailing values and beliefs prevalent at the time by examining the everyday events of that period. When a researcher seeks to analyze the thinking of a period, this method is employed. Beyond beliefs and values, intellectual research can reveal the thinking process of an age, and how it evolved over time.

Historical research in nursing is a rigorous and exacting pursuit. Unlike its quantitative counterparts, it may require first finding, then visiting archives, that may be far from home. Historical research is a journey physically, and intellectually through time.


Submitted by Chris Malmgreen, MA, RN, CHES