

Book Review: The essential concepts of nursing

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The essential concepts of nursing

By John R. Cutcliffe and Hugh P. McKenna
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There are a number of possible ways of categorising (or perhaps conceptualising) this book. On one level, it works relatively well as a textbook, as a resource for teaching and learning, perhaps for a post-graduate course on the nature of nursing. On another (higher?) level, it works somewhat better as a reference book and as a resource for academic study and writing. However, it is best seen as a volume of collected papers, as state(ment)s of the art and science of nursing theory and practice from a variety of perspectives by a variety of experts in their own fields. As such, it is a book to dip into as the need and desire arises, rather than one to be read from cover to cover; as more akin to a collection of short stories than a novel.

Having said that, the opening chapter by the editors, entitled 'An introduction to concepts and their analyses' is a miniature masterpiece of concise writing that should be read by all students and academics, not only for its clarity, not only for its exemplary section on how to approach a concept analysis, but for the extremely effective use of metaphor in clarifying some very difficult and often misunderstood concepts such as concepts(!), theories and phenomena. Equally good is the concluding chapter, which provides an excellent critique of concept analysis, leading to the (perhaps inevitable) closing statement that more work needs to be done, possibly paving the way (as the editors strongly hint) for a second volume. Why wait for the next volume, however, when this book provides an excellent set of blueprints for conducting your own analysis on the concept of your choice!

The concept analyses themselves vary in form and content to the extent that it is very difficult to summarise them in a short review. Some follow the traditional format initially set out by John Wilson in 1963, and later adapted for nursing by Walker and Avant (what the editors refer to, perhaps misleadingly, as 'quantitative' approaches), whilst others follow a looser, or perhaps deeper, format (which the editors term 'qualitative' approaches) based on the work of Janice Morse and Beth Rodgers. Some are concise, whilst others come complete with multiple appendices. Some restrict themselves to the nursing literature, whilst others draw on sources as wide as Shakespeare, popular music, cinema and theatre. (As an aside, I was slightly disappointed that, despite the editors' plea for the use of 'fictional literature, poetry, song, photographs, paintings and film', very few of the writers strayed beyond professional and academic texts in their search for examples of the concepts.) Whilst the diversity of approaches and styles contributes to the richness of the book, it also offers a suggestion as to its limitations as a coherent course text, and why it is perhaps better to think of it as a collection of short stories by a divergent group of writers.

Inevitably, reading this book cannot help but sensitise the reader to the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding most of the concepts we habitually use in our professional discourse, including the concept of 'nursing' itself (which, significantly, does not appear in the book). On the one hand, this led me to compile my own 'top ten' list of missing concepts, which, incidentally, were quite different from those missing concepts identified by the editors. On the other hand, reading this book also alerted me to the self-referential nature of any undertaking of this type, since ultimately, a concept can only be defined in relation to other concepts. This suggests that almost every word employed to clarify each of the twenty concepts also needs its own concept analysis. A good example is provided by the editors in their closing chapter. They discuss the point made by Morse that some concepts are more mature than others, before recognising the inevitable implication of this, which is the need for an analysis of the concept of 'maturity' itself. More fundamentally, however, and as Saussure pointed out nearly a century ago, words and concepts can only be understood in terms of what they are not; that is, by their difference from other words and concepts. Seen in this way, the book is, as the picture on its cover suggests, merely the tip of an iceberg that extends down to the very roots of our language. Once we begin to analyse concepts, any concepts, it is very difficult to know where to stop.

Finally, the book prompted me to re-read Wilson's seminal *Thinking With Concepts*, from which Walker and Avant borrowed so significantly. Wilson's book does, of course, have its roots firmly in the neo-positivist school of analytical philosophy, it is to some extent reductionist, and it was, he freely admits, written explicitly for public schoolboys to help them with their university entrance exams. Despite these reservations, it is beautifully written, it draws on a breathtakingly wide range of examples, and it is probably still the best starting place for a general introduction to concept analysis. However, for those readers specifically interested in nursing, Cutcliffe and McKenna's book comes a very close second.

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