Foucault’s notion of problematization: a methodological discussion of the application of Foucault’s later work to nursing research

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This study takes its point of departure in an oft-voiced critique that the French philosopher Michel Foucault gives discourse priority over practice, thereby being deterministic and leaving little space for the individual to act as an agent. Based on an interpretation of the latter part of Foucault’s oeuvre, we argue against this critique and provide a methodological discussion of the perception that Foucault’s method constitutes, primarily, discourse analysis. We argue that it is possible to overcome this critique of Foucault’s work by the application of methodological tools adapted from Foucault’s later writings and his diagnosis of his own work as studies of forms of problematization. To shed light on the possibilities that this approach offers to the researcher, we present a reading of aspects of Foucault’s work, with a focus on his notion of forms of problematization. Furthermore, we elaborate on concepts from his so-called genealogical period, namely ‘the dispositive’, strategy and tactics. Our interpretation is supported by examples from a study of the emergence of Danish nursing education, which is based on an analytical framework that we developed in the light of an interpretation of aspects of Foucault’s work.

Key words: critical research approaches, Foucault, power relations, qualitative research, research methodology.

Despite nurse-researchers’ substantial interest in the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, little attention has been paid to Foucault’s reflections that his own writings are studies of ‘forms of problematization’. While numerous studies in nursing research draw on Foucault and discourse analysis or governmentality, we have not identified studies in English, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian or German that draw specifically on Foucault’s notion of forms of problematization. In our own studies, we have found the application of Foucault’s notion of problematization to be fruitful. In this

1 As an example, an ongoing search of nursing-related databases completed in June 2014 failed to identify studies drawing on this part of the authorship. CINAHL and PubMed were searched both in abstract, keywords and full text using search terms such as: Foucault*, problem* and problematization. Abstracts were read if the word ‘problematization’ was found in the full-text search. No articles were identified, while a search in EBSCO using the same terms revealed an article describing how to establish ways to arrive at challenging research questions based on existing literature (Sandberg and Alvesson 2011).
article, we will therefore draw attention to how, towards the end of his life, Foucault considered his own writings and identified that his work centred on the investigation of forms of problematization (Foucault 1984a,b).

Foucault has been regarded as the founding father of discourse analysis (Raffinse 1999) and is described as such in a well-known book on discourse analysis (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999). However, he did not agree with this label and discussed its use on various occasions. In his early writings, he found he had broadened the understanding of the term discourse beyond being an expression for a spoken or written debate or conversation (Foucault 2001a). In The Archaeology of Knowledge (Foucault 2001a, 49), he asserted that discourse cannot be reduced to language and speech. It is more than a confrontation between a reality and a language and must therefore be treated as practices. Foucault’s project was to broaden the meanings of the word discourse: ‘I believe that I have, in fact, added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements’ (Foucault 2001a, 80). Like other scholars, we have in previous work drawn on this conception when undertaking discourse analysis (Madsen and Frederiksen 2008). Later in his oeuvre, however, he stated that the term discourse includes all kinds of linguistic activities, whether spoken or thought, but in addition also encompasses the forms and patterns that discourses have to follow when expressed, as well as the rules for organizing discourses in certain patterns (Foucault 1976, 2001c).

Foucault has been criticized as being deterministic (Moussa and Ron 1996) and for drawing too heavily on the greater significance of discourses over practices, as posited by, cf. Callewaert (2006). This critique addresses Foucault’s principal viewpoints on the significance of discourses in playing an important role in the construction of reality, as posited in his earlier work, not least in The Archaeology of Knowledge (Foucault 2001a) and on his work on power analytics as expressed in, for example The History of Sexuality (Foucault 1976). Here, Foucault elaborates on the role of discourses in power relations. By introducing the concept ‘forms of problematization’, Foucault attempted to counter the label put on his work as simply discourse analysis.

This critique is also put forward by Fairclough (1992), whose often-employed method of critical discourse analysis builds on a critical reading and elaboration of Foucault’s work. Fairclough claimed that Foucault regards discourses as constitutive. He argued that, even though Foucault did address practice with his concept of ‘discursive practice’, he understood it as ‘a system of anonymous, historical rules’. Fairclough claimed that Foucault’s work suffers from an inadequate concept of practice, and critiqued Foucault for reducing practice to structures and for always focusing on structures. The consequence of this, Fairclough argued, is that it leaves the impression of ‘people being helplessly subjected to immovable systems of power’ (Fairclough 1992, 57).

This critique of Foucault’s work as heavily weighting the impact of structures on people is not new. Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982) discussed what they called the methodological failure of archaeology and agreed that, in his early work, Foucault favoured discourse, and thereby theory, over practice. In his later works, however, Dreyfus and Rabinow acknowledged that he considered practice to be more fundamental than theory. Foucault simply dropped the idea that the intelligibility of the human sciences can be found in some system of formation rules or in a horizon of meaning shared by the participants. Instead, he caught sight of the role played by social practices (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 103). On various occasions, Foucault responded to the critique of his work as deterministic by arguing that power is exercised only over free subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities (Foucault in Forner-Betancourt et al. 1987; Foucault 1983).

The understanding of discourse as one among a range of practices that play an important role in the construction of reality, as well as being part of reality itself, differs from the way discourse is conceived in some discourse analysis approaches. McCloskey, for example, draws on Fairclough and defines discourse as ‘a belief, practice or knowledge that constructs reality and provides a shared way of understanding the world’ (McCloskey 2008). Similarly Crowe, drawing on Lupton, claims that ‘language constructs how we think about and experience ourselves and our relationships with others’ (Crowe 2005). According to Crowe, language is always embedded in a particular discourse. Discourses are regarded as patterns that represent such phenomena in language.

In our interpretation of Foucault, we draw on the way Foucault understood discourse in his later work, but acknowledge that he did lay emphasis on the role of discourses and that his considerations on the role of discourse changed throughout his work. In this study, we argue that Foucault’s notion of problematization can serve as a useful concept in nursing and health sciences research and that the critique of Foucault’s work to allow discursive structures to rule practice and his work thereby to be deterministic can be countered. We consider that Foucault’s diagnosis of his work as the exploration of forms of problematization captures the key elements of all his work. Furthermore, we suggest that it would be appropriate to give Foucault’s
elaboration on forms of problematization an umbrella function in research.

First, we lay out the significant elements of Foucault’s work on problematization. We highlight how his work has been criticized as deterministic, in that it gives precedence to discursive practices formed by historical rules or structures and thereby suggests that practices are determined by these rules. Accordingly, we introduce the critique of Foucault as a historian. We argue that the intention of his historical studies was not to illuminate a historical reality, but to elucidate how a certain area came to be the subject of problematization. Subsequently, we outline what we consider to be useful elements of Foucault’s later work, written during what is called his ‘genealogical period’ (Raffnsoe, Gudmand-Høyer and Thaning 2008, 45). We present as key elements the concept of ‘the dispositive’ and Foucault’s distinction between strategy and tactics. We also elaborate on how discourses play a role in Foucault’s understanding of power. Finally, to illustrate our points, we exemplify how we have worked with forms of problematization in our own research. We draw on a study in which the first author of this article explored the emergence of Danish nursing education.

**FORMS OF PROBLEMATIZATION**

Shortly before his death in 1984, Foucault described his work as a process of exploring forms of problematization (Foucault 1984a). Thereby, he captured the essence of his whole oeuvre, in which he used a range of different approaches. Foucault worked with rather loosely defined concepts, as demonstrated by his changing understanding of discourse. He understood forms of problematization as a collection of thoughts, stemming from behaviour or an area of action that loses its familiarity and thereby provokes a number of difficulties around it (Foucault 1984a, 388). We have mentioned the criticism of Foucault’s work as deterministic, based on the weight he placed on discursive structures. The fact that Foucault addressed behaviour or an area of action that provokes difficulties demonstrates that Foucault did not think of people’s actions as solely determined by discursive structures, and he did not consider reality to be a discursive construction. Foucault puts it this way: ‘...For I think there is a relation between the thing which is problematized and the process of problematization. The problematization is an ‘answer’ to a concrete situation which is real’ (Foucault 2001b, 172).

Hence, it is possible to investigate both discursive and non-discursive practices. However, Foucault did not offer an exhaustive account of these practices or the relationship between discursive practices and other practices – a shortcoming also noted by Fairclough (1992, 56–57).

Along with other researchers (cf. Moussa and Scapp 1996), we take the lack of a firm and exhaustive definition as helpful in our studies. Following Foucault, the changes from which a problematization derives may result from different sources – for example social, economic or political processes. Accordingly, forms of problematization can be investigated through an examination of how problems have been considered, discussed and solved (Foucault 1984a, 389ff).

This leads to the question of how Foucault understood thinking. Again, Foucault did not provide his reader with very clear definitions on the concepts he introduced. He described thinking as an activity, a form of action, and he linked the history of thinking and the history of forms of experiences in his own work (1984b, 334–5). He claimed that there are no forms of experience without a form of thinking that enables them to be examined through the optic of the history of thinking. Thus, thoughts are not to be found in theoretical formulations, such as those of philosophy or science. Rather, thought should be understood and analysed as the very form of action. The thinking actions imply a subject who is conscious of her/himself and others and can thus be identified and analysed in every manner of speaking, doing or behaviour. Foucault put it like this:

> The study of forms of experiences can thus proceed from behaviour. Foucault put it like analysis of ‘practices’ – discursive or not – as long as one qualifies that word to mean the different systems of action *insofar as* they are inhabited by thought as I have characterized it here (Foucault 1984b, 334–5).

Hereby, Foucault established thinking as not only a mental, cognitive or linguistic activity but as a concrete practice. Although it may seem a rather abstract explanation of what constitutes thinking, we find that this way of understanding thinking renders it possible to overcome the dichotomy between practice and theory, as both thinking and acting are understood as practices. Therefore, we disagree with Fairclough’s critique of Foucault’s understanding of practice. Foucault did not reserve his investigations for the analysis of discourses, but investigated specific historical ‘processes of problematization’ understood as the question of why and how certain conditions took precedence over something else and how these conditions were experienced as problems (Foucault 1984a, 388).

In Foucault’s own studies, he was concerned with three traditional fields of problems: (i) our relationship with truth via scientific knowledge, namely regimes of knowledge; (ii) our relationship with others through strategies and power relations, namely regimes of practices; and (iii) the
relationship between truth, power and self, namely the relation to self (Martin 1988, 15). Foucault did not regard the historicity of thought as independent from economic, social or political impacts (Foucault 1984a, 388). However, it was a crucial point for him to comprehend these relations as complex and changeable and with no specific and pre-given starting point. This means that, in contrast to, for example, Marxism, in which the economic system is supposed to form the basis for both society and consciousness (Heilbroner 1980; Måanson 2013), Foucault did not operate with an initial reason as a driver that moves society forward. Thus, forms of problematization have to be examined by specifically taking the point of departure in the coexisting practical and discursive occurrence of a problem bringing about thoughts. One has to take a starting point in a collection of practices and discourses gathered around an experienced difficulty, as Foucault did in his studies of madness, imprisonment and medicine (Foucault 1984a, 389; Foucault 1984b, 335). As Foucault’s studies were historical, he gained access to all these diverse practices through the written word or through architecture, pictures and paintings. However, when investigating contemporary forms of problematization, interviews and observations of people in action may also be used.

FOUCAULT AS HISTORIAN

Foucault’s studies were historical, and his use of empirical sources has been discussed and criticized (Burrell 1988). The historian Porter (2001) was sceptical of his empirical work, while the Australian historian Windschuttle compared Foucault’s critique of human science and philosophy to a slaughterhouse, declaring Foucault’s use of historical sources as both supercilious and careless (Windschuttle 2000, 149). From Windschuttle’s realist position, objectivity and truth are the criteria for a historical investigation. However, Foucault never sought such a truth, as he explains in his response to a critique that his use of Bentham’s Panopticon was not a realistic picture of the reality in prisons:

...if I had wanted to describe ‘real life’ in the prisons, I indeed wouldn’t have gone to Bentham. But the fact that this real life isn’t the same thing as the theoreticians’ schemes doesn’t entail that these schemes are therefore utopian, imaginary, etc. One could only think that if one had a very impoverished notion of the real (Foucault 1991, 81).

However, for Foucault, these schemas and systems correspond to a whole series of practices and strategies:

For another thing, these programmes induce a whole series of effects in the real (which isn’t of course the same as saying that they take the place of the real): they crystallize into institutions, they inform individual behaviour, they act as grids for the perception and evaluation of things (Foucault 1991b, 81).

This means that, for Foucault, these programmes for behaviour, of which Bentham’s Panopticon was an example, despite the fact that they were not fully executed, should not be taken as unsuccessful schemes for creating a reality. He considered the programmes as a part of reality that affects reality, similar to the way the distinctions truth and falsehood influence the ways people ‘govern’ themselves and others (Foucault 1991b, 82).

Accordingly, a study of forms of problematization should not intend to shed light on a specific historical event. Instead, sources can be studied to elucidate how a certain area came to be the subject of problematization, how the subject has been problematized and what knowledge came into being through these problematizations. The sources can thus contribute to answering the question of what it has been possible to think and do during a certain period.

THE DISPOSITIVE AS THE CONCEPT OF A WEB-LIKE GRID

The concept of explorations of forms of problematization covers Foucault’s whole authorship in which a common feature is the impression he creates of web-like networks or grids tied together by discursive and non-discursive practices. But to provide a more specific framework for a study, we suggest turning to Foucault’s so-called genealogical period, in which he elaborated on his power analytic and termed the area for his investigations a ‘dispositive’ (Foucault 1976, 83). In using the term dispositive, Foucault drew on military terminology, underscoring the strategic plays in a field. The term comprises Foucault’s power analytic (Foucault 1976, 1978) and was used as an image of a sort of strategic formation whose main function is to respond to a crisis during a given historical period.

Foucault described a dispositive as a sort of mechanism or machinery embedded in the dynamics of power. The mechanism supports and is supported by knowledge and contains a heterogeneous collection of discourses, institutions, architecture, regulations and rules, scientific explanations, doctrines, philosophical, moral and philanthropic theorems and everything said or not said. These elements comprise the content of the dispositive, while the dispositive itself is the network connecting the elements (Foucault 1978, 119–20).

The connections between discursive and non-discursive elements are changeable: positions change, functions alter.
Examples of dispositives are sexuality, with its medical body of knowledge, or imprisonment with its jurisprudence, pedagogy and psychology (Foucault 1976, 83; Foucault 1978, 121). Consequently, when studying dispositives, one has to identify and draw on additional material in order to discern the complex power relations involved.

**THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN STRATEGIES AND TACTICS AS A MEANS TO OVERCOME DETERMINISM**

We have found Foucault’s distinction between strategies and tactics very helpful in understanding his view of power (Foucault 1976, 83–138), and especially in helping us to overcome the critique of Foucault’s work as deterministic. Power relations and strategies play an important role in Foucault’s description of a dispositive. Power relations are to be understood as productive forces, not something from which one could or should be freed or free oneself. Power is taken to be the plays of strategies (Foucault 1976, 1980, 1983, 1988, 1991a).

The term ‘strategy’ is part of the military terminology as used in the description of the dispositive. Foucault emphasized that strategies should not be understood as intentional acts employed by somebody making a conscious effort to make something happen to fulfil a certain purpose. This does not mean that there is no intentional action involved in strategies. Rather, intentional acts are to be understood as tactics that play their part in the strategic game in unpredictable ways. They are not identifiable in a one-to-one relation in analyses of strategies. Hence, strategies cannot be traced back to individuals and their intentions. As a result of this understanding, strategies will not be found by asking what somebody’s goal was, or who did what and why. Strategies can be found only by asking questions of a larger field, namely the dispositive (Foucault 1976).

**WORKING WITH FOUCALUT’S NOTION OF FORMS OF PROBLEMATIZATION – AN EXAMPLE**

To illustrate our points, we will exemplify how we have been inspired to work with forms of problematization. We draw on a study of the emergence of Danish nursing education, in which the first author of this article explored the process by which, at the beginning of the 19th century, the sick person became a hospital patient whose care came to require a formalized nursing education from the person who nursed him (Frederiksen 2005).

**CONSIDERING THE AREA OF NURSING EDUCATION AS A FORM OF PROBLEMATIZATION**

Drawing on Foucault’s way of posing questions to discern how areas taken for granted lose their familiarity, we were inspired to ask how it came into being that care of the sick in the mid-19th century became a problem, the solution to which was to establish a formal educational programme, namely nurse education. In addition, as a subsidiary question, we specifically wanted to shed light on how the untrained caregiver, called the ‘ward woman’, and her behaviour became a problem, the solution to which was to replace her with an educated woman of class, namely the trained nurse.

This corresponds to the way Foucault described how forms of problematization emerge: that something in reality, in this case the care of people in hospital, is experienced as a problem and, accordingly, ceases to function unproblematically, leading to questions being raised. In the early 19th century, what is verbalized as the untrained nurse’s lack of culture begins to be problematized. As time passes, it is suggested that she should be replaced by a woman of culture, who is assumed to possess certain qualities that make her better able to comply with the doctor’s requirement for a helper (Frederiksen 2008, 73).

**POsing QUESTIONS AND ORGANIZING THE STUDY**

As we have described, Foucault was concerned with three traditional fields of problems, namely regimes of knowledge, regimes of practice and the relation to self (Martin 1988).

This may inspire researchers to organize a study around these issues. In our example, the researcher posed questions about the regimes of knowledge in which the educational programme was embedded, the regime of practice to which the nurse had to adjust and the relation that she had to develop towards herself in order to become a nurse during the period under scrutiny (Frederiksen 2005, 29).

**DATA COLLECTION INSPIRED BY FOUCALUT’S CONCEPT OF THE DISPOSITIVE**

We have utilized Foucault’s idea of the dispositive as a web-like grid in which discursive practices are considered to be practices among other practices, without the researcher having to take a stand about the exact relation between discourses and other practice and without having to consider
discourse as a representation of phenomena. In the study of nursing education, the researcher drew on a wide range of sources and also undertook different kinds of analysis. Although she did not commence an exhaustive investigation which, in principle, would be endless, she tried to gather various sorts of data so as to examine the network surrounding the emergence of Danish nursing education and of the nurse. This meant that it was not only discursive practices, understood as different kinds of linguistic activities, that were identified; the researcher also investigated how nursing students came into being as professional nurses – that is, through which discursive and non-discursive practices did the student nurse become a nurse. This question guided the researcher to draw on a variety of sources.

As an example, the researcher had access to the Danish National Museum’s collection of handwritten nurses’ memoirs dating back to the late 19th century. In the Danish Museum of Nursing, a range of sources were collected. These were broadcasted interviews with nurses, older texts describing the work of untrained nurses, photographs, applications to the nursing programme by prospective students, covering a period from the early 20th century and up to the 1970s, assessments of students for the same period, students’ notes from lectures, pamphlets used for recruiting new applicants, legal texts, regulations, statutory instruments and guidelines for both untrained nurses and student nurses.

The researcher was allowed access to a school register covering a period from 1970 to 2000, and course material from nursing students at a nursing college was collected. Other nursing students contacted the researchers on their own initiative, having heard about the study and contributed various instructional materials, such as lecture notes, assessments, instructional guidelines and school periodicals. A librarian helped to locate old texts stemming back to the 18th century, and from the National Library, it was possible to gain access to periodicals on relevant topics from around the year 1800. In addition, instructional textbooks for nurses and medical students were collected.

ANALYSING NURSING EDUCATION AS A GRID

As described above, a variety of discourses, tactics, buildings and artefacts, together with bodily absorbed strategies, play a part in the dispositive (Foucault 1978). In the study of nursing education, this meant that it was not only discursive practices that were identified in the grid; the researcher also asked how the nursing students came into being as professional nurses. Through the analysis of nurses’ memoirs, classroom notes, essays and textbooks, the researcher ascribed a complex of practices to the practice regime inlaid in which the becoming nurse was formed, namely ‘being thrown into work, always having busy hands, bearing a heavy responsibility, and being reprimanded when doing something not in accordance with stated or unstated rules of good behaviour’ (Frederiksen 2005, 228). This complex of practices was identified as part of what the researcher suggested to be a strategy of order, leading the student to mentally and bodily absorb what a nurse should do and what she ought to be.

In accordance with Foucault’s distinction between tactics and strategies, the researcher did not focus on the intentional part of the field under scrutiny. The researcher did not therefore ask why the actors in the field acted as they did or what being a nursing student meant to the students. This corresponds to the way Foucault described his historical studies. The aim was to shed light on the strategies as they appeared through a mapping of the many different discursive and non-discursive practices that could be revealed when analysing the field where the individuals, namely untrained nurses, nursing students, physicians, nurses, leaders, priests, administrators, patients and politicians, among others, were positioned and acted in a dynamic grid of strategies.

The very diverse set of data provided a rich opportunity to work within the framework of the dispositive. The challenge was to keep track of the different sources and their role in the dispositive. In mapping the knowledge regime, for example, the textbooks played an important role. The nurses’ memoirs supplied information about practices in the field as well as about the technologies through which the nurse student’s behaviour was regulated (Frederiksen 2005, 194).

THE EMERGENCE OF DANISH NURSING EDUCATION

Finally, it was possible to outline the dispositive in which nursing education and the nurse-to-be were embedded. Using the metaphor ‘figure of thoughts’ inspired by the way Foucault described thoughts as identifiable in different practices within a given period, it was possible to grasp and combine the three different regimes: the knowledge regime, the practice regime and the relation to self. Hence, what was termed a ‘figure of orderliness’ was outlined, assuming the shape of a strategy aimed at shaping the nursing student’s relationship to herself so that she could maintain order, create a system and behave properly. In this figure of orderliness, religious moorings, charity and the future nurse’s motivation for her choice of profession played key roles.

Using a metaphor from one of the textbooks, it was found that the nursing student had to adapt to a role, like a cog in a giant machine, by being thrown into work, always

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having busy hands, bearing a heavy responsibility, and being reprimanded when she did something wrong. And it was concluded that the nurse-to-be had to have a relationship to herself, prompting her to absorb the demands on her conduct, compelling her not only to behave well but also to be good.

**DISCUSSION**

In this study, by drawing on Foucault’s description of his own work as explorations of forms of problematization, we have argued that it is possible to overcome the oft-voiced critique that Foucault’s work is deterministic, that he prioritizes discourse and, thereby, theory ahead of practice. We have argued that Foucault’s work can serve as an adequate framework for research studies. In the study from which we draw our examples on how to work with forms of problematization, we have not been in want of more specific guidelines to support the data collection and analysis for the study.

We have also called attention to the way Foucault worked with rather loosely defined concepts and never offered exhaustive accounts of discursive and non-discursive practices, which his critics have judged as a shortcoming. We have emphasized that we do not consider this to be a shortcoming. On the contrary, we find these loosely defined concepts support our research.

We find it fruitful to combine approaches based on different aspects of Foucault’s writings and find support for this in Foucault’s own remarks on how to apply his concepts. Foucault considered himself as a writer for users, not for readers, and he described his writing as ‘a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area’ (Foucault 1974, 523-4).

Foucault (1983, 210) suggested that researchers in their empirical studies take their point of departure in different kinds of resistance against power. He also encouraged researchers to ‘rediscover the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, play of forces, strategies and so on which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal and necessary’ (Foucault 1991b, 76).

We find these suggestions fruitful as they enable the researcher to pose questions to what occurs as self-evident in health system, clinical nursing and nurse education. Hence, the researcher can analyse the multiple processes that constitute an area of problematization. We suggest that studies based on forms of problematization enable researchers to tailor the method to the event under investigation and to draw on a wide range of sources without having to consider discourse as constituting reality and without having to consider individuals as being ruled by discourses. Thereby, forms of problematization can serve as a helpful approach in nursing science to identify new areas of investigation and thus making it possible to shed new light on important aspects in these areas.

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