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Georg Henrik von Wright: Explanation of the human action

An analysis of von Wright's assumptions from the perspective
of theory development in nursing history

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this essay is chosen for the purpose of obtaining a deeper insight into various methodological aspects related to my forthcoming doctoral work; an historical biographical study of the Norwegian nursing pioneer, Bergljot Larsson (1883 – 1968).

In the essay I claim that it is of great importance that the interpreter is explicit on the assumptions underlying his interpretations, and is aware of their influence on the theory developed. I further discuss how the Finnish philosopher, G.H. von Wright can affect the development of theory in nursing history by analyzing and evaluation his assumptions on human actions. The analyzes, evaluations and discussions take place within the theoretical framework of the American nurse scientist, Hesook Suzie Kim.

Looking at von Wright from Kim's perspective of the nursing knowledge system, makes it obvious that von Wright gives directions to aspects and phenomena of great significance to nursing. Von Wright's combination of explaining and understanding the human action is a very attractive feature from the perspective of developing nursing history. Seeing the interpretation as a result of both describing and understanding is in my view a strength that can be utilized most fruitfully in developing theories within nursing history.

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay is part of the Doctoral Seminar in nursing science at the Institute of Nursing Science, Oslo. Writing this essay will primarily give me a chance to gain a deeper insight into various methodological aspects related to my forthcoming doctoral work. The subject of the essay is chosen for this purpose. In my dissertation, I wish to explore the life of one of the most renowned leaders in Norwegian nursing history so far, Bergljot Larsson. After having founded the Norwegian Nursing Association (NSF) in 1912, Miss Larsson was its leader for 23 years. One of my main purposes will be to provide an understanding of Miss Larsson's engagement in nursing and the motive power behind this engagement expressed through her actions. Accordingly my assumptions and beliefs regarding human actions must be conscious and unequivocal.

One of the aims of knowledge development in history is to understand human action. A main question in the debate over the nature of human actions is whether they are significantly different from the rest of the changes that occur in nature. When human actions are interpreted, it is of great importance that the interpreter is explicit on the assumptions underlying his interpretations, and is aware of their influence on the theory developed.

The Finnish philosopher, G.H. von Wright has contributed to the debate on the nature of human action. In his book *Explanation and understanding*, and in his article «*On explanations in the science of history*», he threw light on human action and provided an account of the assumptions he makes about how action can be explained and understood in a historical perspective. In this essay, it is my intention to analyze his assumptions and evaluate how these can affect the development of theory in nursing history. In the discussions, the standpoints of other philosophers and historians will be applied, together with my own project description.

Before entering into von Wright's assumptions, a brief description of human actions in general will be presented. As regards the perspective of theory development in nursing, I will take inspiration mainly from Hesook Suzie Kim's thinking in nursing. Based on her framework the analyzes, evaluation and discussion will take place.

II. HUMAN ACTION

1. The nature of human action

In addition to self-locomotion and purposefulness, human actions described by Polkinghorne (1983), also have the characteristic of intention. These are the human actions of this essay's concern. Intention exists when somebody does something with an awareness of an action-plan (p. 171). As human action concerns intended activity, it includes communication acts as well as bodily movements (p. 172). Different theories have been developed and various views have been presented regarding human action, and the subject has also been debated over years. How the actions are being accounted for and explained, depends on the philosophical tradition to which the scientist subscribes. I believe, however, that it is often difficult to place the scientists very strictly within the one or the other tradition. It might therefore be better to say that they lean more heavily to the one tradition than to the other.

Carl Gustav Hempel can be considered as a representative of the received view. The received view (or the logical positivism/neo-positivism/logical empiricism) has its roots in the positivistic tradition, inspired by the natural sciences (Polkinghorne, 1983). In 1942 Hempel entered into the discussion of methodical problems in history with his article: «*The function of General Laws in History*». From this a debate started which is still going on. Hempel's theory on historical explanations is generally mentioned as «*The Covering Law Theory*». His position was that human actions can be accounted for by the same laws as in causal explanations (von Wright, 1969; Polkinghorne, 1983).

Those who subscribe to the empirical tradition, and as such follow Hempel, can broadly speaking be considered either to hold only public observations counting as scientific data, or to accepting introspectively known mental events as part of causal explanations (ibid., p. 174). They contend that explanation of human action should be of the causal type.

Radically different views to the model of causal explanation for human action, in addition to von Wright's, were taken by among others, William Dray, Richard Taylor, Ludvig Wittgenstein, and Charles Taylor (von Wright, 1971; Polkinghorne, 1983). They represented an opposition to the

methodological monism, and to the ideals associated with the natural sciences, and can be considered as subscribing to the post-empiricist tradition. Significant assumptions within this position are the view of the individual as participating in cultural, historical and social contexts, and the focus on meaning and understanding in context (Polkinghorne, 1983; von Wright, 1969; Thompson, 1990).

To limit myself in this superficial presentation of a broad and complex subject, I shall pay brief consideration only to Charles Taylor and his model of teleological explanation. Taylor held that human actions are instances of teleological laws instead of causal laws. The form of a teleological law is such that an event is accounted for in terms of how it is required, so that an end can be brought about (Polkinghorne, 1983 p. 186). Contrary to the causal explanations that normally point to the past, the teleological explanations are directed to the future (von Wright, 1971). Polkinghorne (1983), citing Davis' (1979) summary of a teleological law, writes:

«Whenever an action of type A is most suitable of all the types in the agent's repertoire for achieving the agent's purpose, an action of type A occurs.»

Concerning von Wright, he argues against a causal theory of action. He brings up the schema of *the practical inference*, which he claims is that of a teleological explanation «turned upside down» (von Wright, 1971, p. 96).

2. G.H von Wright's assumptions of human action.

G.H. von Wright has been a professor of philosophy both in Helsinki and Cambridge. His interests in logic, the science of philosophy, ethics and the philosophy of culture has resulted in a number of books and articles as: *The logical Problem of Induction*, 1943; *A treatise on Induction and Probability*, 1951; *Explanation and Understanding*, 1971.

Von Wright claims that human actions have a central and fundamental place within historical explanations. The following presentation of his assumptions is based mainly on his article «*On explanations in the science of history*» (1969), and also on chapter IV. (*Explanation in History*

and the Social Sciences) in his book *Explanation and understanding* (1971). The focus will be on the individual, and not on the collective human action. However, I would like to add, as von Wright himself does, that his descriptions of human actions as part of the historical explanation are far from exhaustive.

(a) To explain human action is to understand or perceive the motives on which it is founded.

Included in the motives, and in addition to the *motivating intention* or the *aim* of the action, is also an *intellectual component*: the judgment of the situation and the consideration regarding the means, or how to attain the desired result. The identification of the motives is not possible without referring to the intrinsic action. This means that the action to be explained, and the motives that are meant to explain it, are not logically independent. In consequence, the connection between the explanandum and the explanans is of a conceptual or logical character (1969 p. 16, 17). Von Wright names this kind of inference a *practical inference* (or syllogism). He draws the following schema of a practical inference:

A intends to bring about p. A considers that he cannot bring about p unless he does a. Therefore A sets himself to do a (1971 p. 96).

He claims that the explanation of human action is the schema of practical inference; and that the connection between the motives and the action is of a type of logical necessity (1969 p.18).

(b) Before the explanation can begin, the explanandum must be described. This description tells us what something «is», and gives us an «understanding». This type of understanding is a prerequisite of every explanation, whether causal or teleological. It must not be confused with understanding what something is in the sense of *means* or *signifies*. This second type of understanding is a characteristic which precedes teleological explanations (ibid. 1971). Von Wright (1969) maintains that the application of both the term «understand» and the term «empathy» is suitable as regards his way of explaining human actions. The explanation of the action is characterized by the understanding of the action from the motivation background (p.23).

© According to von Wright (1969), there is usually more than one motivation background that can be reconstructed for a given action. Therefore, in an historical context, one must assume various explanations, concerning one and the same action, to be both correct and complete. To confirm an explanation of a certain human action, a reference to facts that support the aim of the action can be made. These facts must, however, be logically independent of the said certain action (p. 19).

Regarding the motivation background, von Wright withdraws the causal explanations, saying those looking for sufficient conditions may be indirectly relevant to historical research, if they have interesting effects on subsequent human affairs, or interesting causes in antecedent human actions and conditions (1971). The motivation background can consist of the products of cultural, political, religious, *etc.* traditions. There could also be changes in «external» circumstances, as in the physical environment and in technology which make new actions either necessary or possible. How such changes can be contrasted with changes in the «internal» circumstances of motivation - needs and wants - is a question that may be raised (1971 p. 144-145).

(d) Human actions can be related to the conception of *normative pressure*. People do things as required by the law, God, or the customs of the society or good manners. It is important to distinguish between norms which regulate conduct and rules which define various social practices and institutions. Von Wright writes: «Norms of the first kind tell us *that* certain things ought to be or may be done. Norms of the second kind tell us *how* certain acts are performed» (1971 p. 151). Norms of the second kind are often secondary in relation to the first. They are of fundamental importance to *understanding* behavior; to understand *why* people act as they do (p. 151-153).

(e) The achievements, experiences or suffering of one individual or group of individuals sometimes make possible certain achievements of another individual (or generation or group). When significance is attributed to a past event on the grounds that it made possible some later event, the link between the events is a motivational mechanism, whose workings can be reconstructed as series of practical inferences. Von Wright writes: «Events in history «make possible» other events when they reshape the intentions by providing agents with new opportunities for action» 1971 p. 155).

(f) The rational understanding of the action presupposes no valuation of its motivation background. Therefore there are no implications of moralizing or rationalism in the interpretation of the historical event (1969, p. 23).

(g) Finally, I will give a brief account of von Wright's view on «re-evaluating» the past. As the historian tries to understand and explain the more recent past, he attributes to the more distant past a role or significance which it did not possess until more recent events had occurred. Referring to this as reevaluating the past, von Wright says, is misleading. The attribution of new significance to past events is not a subjective matter of revaluation but a matter of explanation with, in principle, objective tests of correctness, that are grounded on facts, and not on what the historian thinks about them (p. 155-156).

My main concern is: In what ways will the use of von Wright's views on human actions affect the development of theory in nursing history. Before entering into this discussion, let us take a look at theory development in nursing.

III. THEORY DEVELOPMENT IN NURSING

1. Theoretical thinking in nursing

Kim stresses the importance of examining the theoretical thinking or theorizing in nursing. Not only do the contents of the theories have to be tested, but also the various levels of philosophical and perspective based orientations from which the scientist's work is being developed. She proposes a five-level analysis framework for reviewing and evaluating theoretical work in nursing (Kim, 1989). I think it would be useful to apply this framework in examining von Wright's assumptions, and also in considering how the application of these assumptions will affect the development of theory in nursing history.

Kim (1989) specifies the five levels as: *The philosophy of science level, the metaparadigm level, the nursing philosophy level, the paradigm level and the theory level.*

The philosophy of science level is concerned with questions related to the scientist's perspectives about the world and science. Analysis at this level can reveal the foundations upon which theories take their form and theorizing progresses.

The metaparadigm level focuses on the content choices which are made for the science.

According to Kim, the metaparadigm level questions permit us to examine to what extent a given theory handles the critical problems or subject matters of interest to the discipline of nursing . The metaparadigmatic structure for examining nursing science developed by Kim, will be presented later.

The nursing philosophy level articulates closely with the philosophy of science level by directing the nature of nursing theory being developed in a methodological sense.

The paradigm level is concerned with the various scientific traditions and perspectives from which the actual theorizing is carried out.

The theory level is concerned with the theories themselves. The theory can be analyzed and evaluated within the framework described.

I have intentionally written «*von Wright's assumptions (views)*». Whether his writings on human actions should be called *a theory* or not depends on one's definition of a theory. Regardless, I would like to argue that using von Wright's assumptions implies directing the nature of the theory being developed. The assumptions can be associated with the level described by Kim as the nursing philosophy level, closely articulating with the philosophy of science level. In accordance with this, the analyses of von Wright's assumptions will refer in particular to these levels. However, developing a scientific theory means that connections between the philosophy of science, theory and methods have to be based on logical congruency and internal correspondence (Kim, 1993). Accordingly, it will also be of interest to examine and discuss how the remaining levels will be affected by his assumptions. As Kim has developed a special typology regarding the metaparadigm level, special attention will be given to this item. I shall try to use this typology in relation to my own study, and to von Wright's assumptions.

V. THEORY DEVELOPMENT IN NURSING HISTORY

1. Historical research

Historical research in nursing is valuable and may provide useful theories about the past. The knowledge gained is useful for several reasons. To understand the present we have to know how it was shaped. Generally speaking historical knowledge can give an insight into how any number of forces influence our profession. In enhancing our consciousness of the prevailing state of tension our profession is in, this knowledge is important. It will also increase the possibilities to make choices and decisions from which the profession will profit. As Streubert and Carpenter say: «Similarly, decisions regarding the nursing profession today risk failure and inadequacy of response if history is ignored» (1995, p. 195).

As already mentioned, the purpose of *my* investigation is to examine the life and leadership of a special person, to identify and to understand the significance of the many contributions she made to the nursing profession in Norway. In this kind of study I want to bring the knowledge of the interrelationship between her administrative style, decisions and convictions, and the ensuing consequences for nursing. Simultaneously, I hope to reveal knowledge of the socio-political context and the philosophical ideas of her time. In this connection one may ask: How will my perspectives about the world and science affect the theory developed? How will they affect the ways various aspects and phenomena of special interest to nursing are elucidated? Concerning the development of theories within nursing history, the attention paid to these questions has been insignificant; at least here in Norway. There seems, however, to be a major consensus among historians in general, that the relationship between the sources and the researcher with his views and preconceptions, determines the theories developed (Carr, 1961; Kjeldstadli, 1993; Church, 1988; Kruman, 1985). It is therefore of great importance that preliminary theories are made explicit. The Norwegian historian, Knut Kjeldstadli, maintains that our views on action will have significant implications on both investigations and inferences. There is also a connection between the view on actions and the view on the society that we need to be aware of (Kjeldstadli, 1991, p.51). Using von Wright's explanation of human action as a preliminary theory in interpreting the historical documents, will

therefore have several implications. These implications require thorough attention. The matter of logical congruency and internal correspondence is relevant, also in historical research.

Taking inspiration from Kim's thinking, the following points will be examined:

- The assumptions of von Wright and his philosophical orientations
- Methodological implications
- Aspects and phenomena of interest to nursing
- Theory and the understanding of nursing

2. The assumptions of von Wright and his philosophical orientations

Von Wright has claimed that his view on human action is orientated to the sciences with the perspective of interpretative science (1969, p. 23). Within this tradition the aim of science is primarily to gain understanding rather than to arrive at the knowledge of prediction and prescription (Kim, 1993). The individual is seen as part of the whole, and cannot be studied as an isolated unit, as opposed to the context-free generalizations in the natural sciences. Knowledge is produced, not discovered (Allen, 1994).

The schema of practical inference ((b)) indicates that von Wright views the person as purposeful, and as possessing intentions and intellect. His schema also indicates a view that considers human actions as rationalistic, and the interpretation of actions as «rationalistic reconstructions». However, he denies this ((f)), and claims that there is no rationalism in the interpretation of historical event.

To explain the way a person acts, an *understanding* of his motives is necessary. The motives are linked both to the person's intellect («the inner world»), and to the person's context («the outer world»). These assumptions can be identified with those within the post-empiricist traditions; and they can be contrasted with the assumptions of the empiricist philosophy which assume that human actions can be structured by law-like regularities that can be identified and manipulated. I would like to add, however, that von Wright's emphasis on the conception of normative pressure ((d)) calls the

attention to the view of human actions as conducted by norms. I shall return to this later in the section.

Von Wright focuses on the *understanding* of the action. To understand the action, one must take a close look at the motives behind. I shall try to apply von Wright's thinking, with a very simple example related to my own work. (Please remember that the focus is on the *form*, not on the content.)

I want to explain the following: «Why did Bergljot Larsson vote for a three-years nursing course education in 1915?» The answer *could* be: «First of all she wanted to raise both the quality, wages and status of the skilled nurses, and considered a three-year course as the best means to achieve this purpose. Secondly, she knew that the majority of the doctors would vote for two types of nursing courses; a short one of 1 ½ years, and one of three years. She considered this proposal to be both an instrument of power against the nursing profession, and also a way of decreasing their independence.»

In the explanation the *aim* is mentioned as raising the quality, wages and status of the skilled nurses. A significant *mean* was to establish a three year course of education. As part of this, the proposal of the doctors had to be countered. From these *premises* we can understand the action of Bergljot Larsson. This is what von Wright calls the *motivation background*. Included in the motives is the aim - raising the wages, status and quality - and the intellectual component - the judgment of the situation, and how to attain the end. To explain this action we have to understand how it has come about by considering certain aims and facts. This is a practical inference. The connection between the motivation background and the action is a form of logical necessity.

To understand Bergljot Larsson's action we have to move back and forth between the person and the situation. The interpretation is a product of the interaction between the individual and the context. Is this «understanding» similar to the understanding that is described as *the hermeneutic circle*? The hermeneutic circle is a metaphor used to describe the experience of moving dialectically between part and whole (Thompson, 1990). It would be interesting to compare von Wright's assumptions with those connected to a hermeneutic perspective. As there are many competing theories of

interpretation within this perspective, I shall delimit myself to two main traditions: *the objective (classical) hermeneutic tradition* and *the Gadamerian (philosophical) tradition*.

There is one main difference between the objective and the Gadamerian hermeneutics. In objective hermeneutics, the belief in suspending the bias of the scholar, and disclosing the meaning of the object of inquiry, plays a prominent part. Accordingly objective hermeneutics tries to meet the requirements of objectivity and value neutrality. Gadamer, however, says that meaning is produced through a fusion of horizons between the text and the interpreter, and emphasizes the interpreters use of his preunderstandings (Wetlesen, 1983; Thompson, 1990).

It seems to me that von Wright is closer to the objective than to the Gadamerian hermeneutics as regards this issue. He never involves the interpreter as part of the interpretations he makes. He focuses rather on the interpreter's sense of logic, and his ability to understand the relationship between the action and the facts in the situation. His statements of re-evaluating the past ((g)) support this, as he says that the attribution of new significance to past events must be associated with objective tests on correctness that are grounded on facts, and not on the historians thoughts about them. It is, however, tempting to add that by this von Wright says that history is not written once and for all, and that the role of the past changes in light of new events. This gives associations to Gadamer's statement that we are all in a historical situation, which represents both the premise and the limitation of what we actually understand (Gadamer, 1986 p. 302). But von Wright never seems to consider the scholar as part of the history he is writing about. I would therefore argue that von Wright makes the interpreter a spectator looking at the history from outside. In this he assumes that there is a correct interpretation of texts that is not dependent on the interaction between the interpreter and his historical and social context.

What happens when the spectator discovers that there is more than one explanation related to the one and same action (©) ? Von Wright is not discussing this problem in an exhaustive way. It seems, however, that what he calls «facts in the situation» plays an important role. The more facts that support the aim of the action, the more confirmed the explanation is. Let me use my own example to go more thoroughly into von Wright's view. In this particular situation Bergljot Larsson voted for a three year course of education. Her aim was to raise the quality, wages and status for all

skilled nurses. Do the sources indicate that she conducted other actions, *independently* of this particular situation, but reflecting the same aim? This brings us back to the concept of the hermeneutic circle. The action must be considered not only in relation to the particular situation, but also in relation to other actions and facts in the remaining sources. The explanation of such confirming facts would be similar to the explanation of the voting; and the more analogies that can be constructed, the more convincing by far the first explanation becomes. According to this von Wright shrewdly calls attention to an inductive way of drawing inferences. Several scientists maintain that the hypothetical-deductive method is very similar to the hermeneutic circle (Føllesdal, Walløe and Elster, 1996). In spite of this, I think it is feasible to associate the hermeneutic circle with von Wright's interpretations of human actions.

As already mentioned, von Wright does not include the interpreter in the hermeneutic circle in a «Gadamerian» way. Like the objective hermeneutics, he considers the interpreter as neutral and valuefree ((f)). This is opposite to the view of several prominent historians. The Norwegian historian, Berge Furre (1973), focuses on three elements related to this subject: The historian *facing* history as a scholar, standing *in* history as a product, and *facing the future* creating history (p. 79). Von Wright seems to contend that the historical product does not reflect the values of the historian. He claims that both the knowledge or facts about a situation, the consideration and use of this knowledge or facts is independent of the values of the interpreter. He focuses on the scholar's sense of logic in his consideration of the motivation background of the action. He stresses that the *understanding* of the action from the background of motivation, is not a «psychological by-product», but a conceptual or logical characteristic attached to the explanation of the action (1969, p. 23). The knowledge of the motivation background becomes, of course, of vitally importance. This knowledge, as I understand it, is an important part of the explanation of the action.¹

In the perspective of objective hermeneutics the focus is primarily on the empathy and understanding of the intentions and the meanings of the historical actor. Gadamer, by way of contrast, attaches greater importance to the historical context. Von Wright, in my opinion, does both. By doing so, he

¹ Von Wright claims that there is a lot of confusion tied to the debate about causation in history. «Causal explanation» in history must not be committed to the covering law theory. He says that explanatory analysis in terms of conditionship relations and the distinction between the various kinds of condition is just as important and useful in the study of human affairs as it is in the natural sciences.

places himself somewhat between these two traditions. His description of the motivation background calls attention to a structural point of view ((c)(d)(e)). Through this he makes the interaction between the players and the structures to a matter of importance. This standpoint is supported by the Norwegian historian, Kåre Lunden, who writes: «One must take seriously that the intention constitutes the action, while other conditions or premises explain why the action was actually carried out» (1991, p. 240, *my transl.*). The famous historian E.H. Carr (1961) seems to have a similar understanding when he writes that actions must be understood within the relationship between human beings and social structures. Von Wright's emphasis on the motivation background is, however, not exactly without its problems in this respect, I shall return to this issue, specially in section V., 5.

So far, I have considered von Wright as belonging to the post-empiricist tradition. I have tried to draw some epistemological lines, and I have also discussed his assumptions within two hermeneutic perspectives, the objective and the Gadamerian. I have concluded that, though he has something in common with both of them, he is more on a level with the objective than with the Gadamerian hermeneutics. The most characteristic feature is his assertion of a correct, valid interpretation of human actions that is not dependent on the interpreter and his context and values. The human action is, however, connected to the «outer world». Events that occur in this world will interact with the individual's «inner world», and therefore be of importance to *understand* the action. Let us move on, and look at the methodological implications of von Wright's assumptions.

3. Methodological implications

What are the methodological implications of using von Wright's assumptions of human action? As regards historical research, I think it is relevant to bring up the concepts of *external* and *internal criticism*. Summarized, one may raise three questions in this relation:

- *What is the authenticity of the documents?*
- *What is the content of the documents (how are they to be interpreted)?*
- *What is the credibility of the documents?*

These three questions are of great importance when the history is to be (re)constructed. *How* one approaches these questions is a matter of methodology. *How* von Wright's assumptions affect the approach is the matter of my concern. (I shall focus on written documents only.)

Included in the first question is the function of the documents regarding both the situation and the context in which they occurred (Kjeldstadli, 1992). In this respect, I think von Wright's focus on the motivation background will be of special interest. Again, let me use Bergljot Larsson as an example. Bergljot Larsson wrote a number of articles about nursing. These articles represent valuable documents to me. The description of the situation and context in which these articles were written will be of great importance. This will constitute part of the background motivation. Von Wright's definitions of the motivation background (©(d)(e)), will require a consideration of traditions and their influence, of the external circumstances or structures and their relevance, and an insight in norms of the period. A description of the historical and cultural horizon of the participants involved in the research is usually done in most interpretive work (Thompson, 1990). There is, however, reason to believe that von Wright's strong focus on the motivation background, and its significance to *understand* the action, requires a thorough knowledge of *facts* tied to the period in question. This means, in my opinion, that the external criticism will be more emphasized, than if his understanding of the human action were, *i.e.*, attached to special motivation or psychological theories.

As regards the interpretations of the documents, von Wright's assumptions will influence the relevance of interpretive methods. As he emphasizes the principles of objectivity, and the value neutrality of the researcher, the methods of interpretation should be in accordance with this view. This means that the method is adequate if it brackets the presuppositions of the researcher and focuses on the object of inquiry. This would be similar to the objective hermeneutics (or *i.e.* phenomenology), and opposite to the Gadamerian hermeneutics. The latter would require an openness and explicit use of own presuppositions. (Thompson, 1990). Through such bracketing the scholar gets rid of his presuppositions, so to speak, and is ready to interpret the original meaning in context. This perspective will also affect the research questions raised, as these have to be within the context of the object of inquiry. Thus the aim is to *reconstruct* a period in the life of the historical player through qualitative analysis, depending on the approach or method chosen.

As already mentioned, this is a controversial and disputed subject, also in the science of history. There are problems connected to von Wright's view on the value neutral interpretations leading to reconstruction of the history. An imminent danger of transferring one's own values to the situation or person that is interpreted is always present. This is a complicated matter, both philosophically and also methodologically. In other words, when I consider an action conducted by Bergljot Larsson as «good» or «bad» for nursing, to what extent are my own values of good and qualified nursing in focus? Being a nurse myself is a double-edged sword in this situation. On the one hand Bergljot Larsson represents values that I myself am close to, I have «inside information» on the subject which can be advantageous. On the other hand this «closeness» can lead to attitudes that are too uncritical. This means that the bracketing of my own values must be awarded special attention. In this respect, my own views regarding nursing are of core significance. A thorough and conscientious work must be done, so that the theory developed in no ways bears the hallmark of my own, hidden values.

As regards the credibility and relevance of the documents, I have a few reflections on the latter. I think may be a consequence of von Wright's views would be a very broad approach to the documents. His inductive way of drawing inferences (p. 12) might result in an openness to the question of relevance, which means that the document is relevant until a close study would suggest the opposite. This is also a consequence of his view on objectivity. It is, however, reasonable to raise questions about objectivity and all the choices that have to be made in relation to the historical documents. As regards their availability: isn't it a product of choices made by others? The choices of the available documents, and the choices of facts within the documents: how can their objectivity be «proved»? Obviously similar problems as mentioned in the above section will be present.

As I consider the matter of methodology within this context, the objective and accurate reconstruction of the historical course of events seems to be the most striking consequence of von Wright's assumptions.

The next question I want to discuss is: *In what ways will von Wright's assumptions contribute by throwing light on phenomena of interest to nursing?*

4. Aspects and phenomena of interest to nursing

The value of understanding and explaining phenomena of interest to nursing within a historical perspective has already been mentioned (p. 8). Applying von Wright's assumptions in understanding human action will affect *how* knowledge is gained, as well as *which* knowledge, or which phenomena come under scrutiny. Which phenomena of interest to nursing are brought into focus by using von Wright's assumptions? Let us first take a closer look at such phenomena through Kim's description of the metaparadigm level.

The metaparadigm level refers to a boundary structure which consists of items or phenomena for investigation for a given disciplinary perspective (Kim, 1987 p. 113). Kim has developed a typology of four domains for structuring nursing knowledge. The typology includes *the client domain*, *the domain of environment*, *the client-nurse domain*, and *the practice domain*. The domains can be considered as a conceptual map, dividing the «nursing-world» into three areas, whereas the fourth area, the domain of environment, has to be considered primarily in the context of providing a more comprehensive understanding and explanations for the phenomena in the other three domains (Kim, 1987, p. 108). The map serves different purposes, as locating and delineating phenomena, delineating concepts, identifying types of knowledge gained, and calling attention to areas requiring further research. Although this map may not have been primarily developed for historical research, nothing should prevent us from trying to use it.

I think it would be appropriate to locate my own study within in the structure, and proceed with the discussions of von Wright from this position. As Kim describes the various domains, I consider the practice domain to be the «right» domain for my study. This short presentation should support my decision.

The Practice Domain includes phenomena particular to the nurse who is engaged in delivering nursing care. (*Bergljot Larsson can be associated with the nurse. Her engagement is in phenomena particular to the nurses who are engaged in delivering nursing care.*) Kim points out two variables to be essential for studying phenomena in the practice domain: *the exogenous*

factors and *the intrinsic* factors. Further she claims that the exogenous factors may be distinguished into four areas: *organizational* and *structural* factors of the nursing care settings; *culture of nursing practice (or the nursing profession, or the NSF, ICN, SSN)* including norms, ethics, conventions and standards; *client-oriented* factors such as nursing care requirements; and *spatiotemporal* aspects. Intrinsic factors (*related to Bergljot Larsson*) include *personal attributes*, the formation of *personal knowledge systems* and *cognitive style*, attributes developed as a result of *previous experience*, and *professional characteristics* such as attitudes, commitment, and socialization (Kim, 1983, p. 137).

The domain of environment has always to be considered in relation to each of the other three domains. *The Domain of Environment* is defined by Kim (1983, p. 80) as the entity that exists external to a person or to humanity, conceived either as a whole or as that containing many distinct elements. Kim conceptualizes the environment in different ways; one of which focuses on three aspects classified as *the physical environment*, *the social environment* and *the symbolic environment*. The physical environment is connected to human ecology, composed of biotic elements ranging from virus to human beings, and abiotic elements distinguished as natural or as artifacts ((p. 86-87). The social environment refers to the social forces such as family and work, as well as more superior structures of the society (p. 90-91). The symbolic environment has three specific components. The first component refers to cultural values and social norms. The second component encompasses symbolic aspects of society that are defined both by structures of social institutions (as science, education and politics), and by structures of institutions such as political, economic, labor, and health-care systems (p. 93). The third component refers to rules of behaviors for social roles (p. 93).

When considering the domain of environment in an historical context attention is drawn to the perspective of structures, which is of great importance in historical research. The major components pointed out are all significant in the examination of Bergljot Larsson's actions.

It has been my intention, in a brief manner, to argue that the practice domain, interacting with the domain of environment, would be the basis domain of my research. Inspiration from Kim's thinking is possible in a multiplicity of ways. I have tried, however, to discern my own limitations within the

framework of this essay, and focused on her thinking for the purpose of using it as a basis for the following discussion.

Von Wright's concern about motives draws our immediate attention to the exogenous factors of the practice domain and to the domain of the environment. His focus on traditions (©) can be associated specially to how phenomena connected to the performance of nursing are affected by cultural, political and religious conditions and traditions in society as a whole. Transferred to my study this perspective has the potential to illustrate various levels of interest, through questions such as: «Did political (or religious) conditions and traditions influence the nursing profession in a way that can contribute to the explanations of certain of Bergljot Larsson's actions?»; or «Can their influence explain why certain actions were chosen as opposed to others - why certain strategies were used - or why certain agreements were entered into?» In this way, valuable knowledge of relations between conditions and traditions, and the nursing profession, and further how this relationship was a source to action could be revealed.

Von Wright's focus on *changes* in external circumstances (©) can be associated with the domain of environment, especially the physical environment, but also the symbolic environment. The conception of *changes* seems to be of great importance, as attention is drawn to how changes, with special interest to the nursing profession, acted as motivational mechanisms for further actions. «How did the development of knowledge and technology of medicine, or how did the clinical picture at that time affect the health service of which the nursing profession was a part? or «How did the growing woman's liberation movement impact the nursing profession?» are important questions which should be asked. An insight into these conditions is considered to be of great significance in order to understand *i.a.* several of Bergljot Larsson's actions. This could also be seen in relation to von Wright's view (e) (p. 5). The common denominator here is how *changes* and *events* can be reconstructed as series of practical inferences.

Von Wright turns a great deal of attention to the concept of *normative pressure*. This gives associations to Kim's practice domain, and to how norms, rules and regulations, both written and unwritten, represent the premises and limitations for action in nursing practice. Similarly the interactive symbolic environment can be associated. Through cultural values, social norms and roles,

it is significant to the action of an individual as well as for a collective or profession. In my study, the normative pressure in the perspective of von Wright could lead to exploring possible values of normative pressure incorporated in Bergljot Larsson's actions. If so, one could ask: «Do they reflect a religious ideology, expectations from the ICN, or are they purely and simply a result of a resolution by the committee?» By making normative pressure a part of the motivation background, we are given an opportunity to obtain an insight into various conditions of normative character. Further, we may perceive how they could have influenced, as in this case in question, the actions of a significant person, and thereby the development of the nursing profession.

From the von Wright sources that I have used, I consider his expressions on the intellectual component ((a)) as vague. I prefer, therefore, to incorporate this component in the following discussion.

Using von Wright's assumptions as a basis for interpreting human action in my study seems to have the potential to enlightening phenomena of particular interest to nursing, as well as revealing significant aspects of the practice domain. In my view, major attention would have been drawn to the exogenous factors in the practice domain and to the influence of structural conditions in the domain of the environment. As there is also great importance attached to the normative pressure, the intrinsic factors of personal character seem, in a sense, to be disappearing. I shall return to this subject in the next section.

5. Theory and the understanding of nursing

In this section, my intention is to review some of the statements in the previous sections. I shall try to discuss and deepen the statements, and to draw some conclusions which are more closely tied to the theory level and to the understanding of nursing. Regarding theory and the understanding of nursing, the theory I intend to develop will be foremost in my thoughts. I shall start by drawing some major lines of importance.

The belief in suspending the bias of the scholar and disclosing the meaning of the object will finally influence the theory developed. I have already described some methodological problems of

importance within a historical perspective. I want now to focus on one consequence which I consider to be an unwanted consequence connected to this view. It is related to the pre-suppositions of the scholar and the avoidance of applying these. In my opinion, such application, could be fruitful, as it allows «today's conditions» to play an active role in the interpretations of the historical records. *I.e.* the discussion of the significance of Bergljot Larsson's actions as regards the development of nursing in Norway, would in my opinion be valuable to relate to an active use of my own pre-suppositions based on today's conditions. The historical knowledge gained this way would lend much to the profession's understanding about the development of the nurse executive; and would also contribute to both self-criticism, and to a more nuanced and extended understanding for nursing. Not utilizing this dimension in a theory, I think, would be a pity. I would like to add that it is not my intention to claim that the application of own pre-suppositions is without problems. *This* particular subject is, however, not to be discussed in my essay.

I consider that the importance von Wright has attached to the motivational background has the potential to affect the theory and understanding of nursing in several ways. The biographical approach and the focus on a certain person, as in my study, forces the question: *How significant was Bergljot Larsson as a person, and how significant was her context (or outer world) to the actions she performed?* When a significant person is investigated, I think there is possible danger to overlook «the room» in which the actions took place. Kjeldstadli characterizes a one sided-focus on the considerations of the player as a potential problem within hermeneutics (1993, p. 118). Calling attention to the background motivation, however, von Wright makes the «action room» more visible. This attention is significant as it provides an opportunity of developing a theory which illustrates the interaction between the player and, in Kim's terminology, the domain of environment. This will make possible a deeper understanding of nursing in a broader context, and also allow an insight in the strategies of a leader.

I have already queried the intrinsic factors of personal character as part of the motivational background. To me they seem to have the potential to become somewhat transparent in the theory. The intellectual component will, as I understand it, appear through the inductive inferences drawn. By the reconstruction of the aim and the considerations of how to attain it, the intellectual component will be revealed in a logic manner. But to what extent will the intellectual component give an insight

into personal interests and properties of the individual? To me the intellectual component seems to play an indirect or secondary role in the interpretation of the action. It is, however, important to me to express unreservedly that the von Wright sources used as a basis in this essay are not sufficient to deal with this subject in an exhaustive way. In addition, I also consider the subject as very complicated to deal with theoretically. At the present time I can only ascertain that it is problematic to assign them a strong and clear position within von Wright's perspective of explanation. If this is so, one could perhaps maintain that this would be a weakness of the theory put forward. An understanding of how the personal properties of a leader affects *i.a.* the decisions that are made, are obviously of both interest and value.

This gives further associations to the normative pressure, described by von Wright as part of the motivation background. Making norms essential to the human action is in my opinion of great importance, and adds a significant dimension to the theory developed. Again, the somewhat vague description of (or my vague understanding of) the intellectual component, and especially the personal interest of the individual, makes it easy to apprehend the player as predominated by external norms in the perspective of von Wright. This *could* lead to explanations characterized by over-facile solutions. Of course, the explicit statements of the actor is of great interest. The problems regarding hidden motives can not, however, be rejected. In that case, von Wright's inductive way of drawing inferences would be a strength, I believe. By looking at several situations in which *i.g.* Bergljot Larsson had to make significant choices, the comparison of her actions and their background motivations might reveal an informative pattern. I would like to add that a statement given by von Wright (1971) in the chapter «*Intentionality and Teleological Explanation*» (which is not included as a main source in this essay) seems to support my thinking. Von Wright writes that there are several indirect ways of establishing that an agent has a certain intention and, moreover, conceives the action necessary its realization. His belonging to a certain cultural community, his education and background of experiences, together with certain traits of character and temperament, represent facts and knowledge about him that may make it plausible for us to think that he acts with the intention of producing *p* by doing *a* (p. 111). In a historical perspective this thinking is of course fruitful and relevant. It is, however, important to remember that a verification of this type is at best hypothetical. Even if the pattern of the actions makes an explanation like this plausible, it *may* turn

out to be incorrect. In a study like mine, focusing on a single individual, I think this thinking is of great significance.

The value of a thorough attention given to the ways in which norms come to exert a pressure on Bergljot Larsson, is a deeper *understanding* of her actions; *i.e.* the reason and the nature of her administrative style and decisions. The consequences of her actions will allow an further understanding and insight into how norms affected the development within the nursing profession and the executive of nursing.

VI. CLOSING REMARKS

History is an important domain of nursing knowledge. The continuous question, while writing this essay, has been: «In what ways would von Wright contribute to develop my theory in nursing history?» One thing I do believe in is that *how* the researcher tries to comprehend the past is crucial in determining the possibilities of what history is and can be. Accordingly, different theories of the same past are made; theories serving the interests of various peoples and groups. Let me conclude this essay by focusing my interpretations of von Wright's contributions from the perspective of theory development in nursing history.

Von Wright has placed himself, as have I, within the interpretative sciences. In my consideration he is not, however, unreservedly within the interpretative tradition. His view on the scholar as value-neutral and his belief in *reconstructing* history seems to promote knowledge about the past, rather than insight in the present. This view can be associated with the ideals within positivistic science. On the other hand, his emphasis on the individual as part of the context and an understanding of the human action within this framework is a feature that can be attached to the interpretative sciences. The methodological implications of his views are marked by this duality. Using his explanation of the human action as a preliminary theory would, however, make several methods and perspectives, especially within phenomenology and hermeneutics, relevant.

When looking at von Wright from Kim's perspective of the nursing knowledge system, it is obvious that von Wright gives directions to aspects and phenomena of great significance to nursing. Working

with his assumptions, I was very «captured» by his motivational background. In my interpretations of the historical documents, I think von Wright would have inspired me to write a history where the impact of external conditions, such as the social, political and cultural setting of the time, had been given a great deal of consideration. The force underpinning this focus would be the knowledge gained through explaining and understanding nursing and specific nursing actions within a broad realm of the context. This would be of importance in a study like mine, as the focus on a significant individual can easily represent a danger of making this individual too significant. In spite of this, I have queried whether the place von Wright gives the external circumstances in the explanation of the action would suppress the attributes and interests of the individual. To what extent would the significance of the very individual be highlighted? This issue is also connected with the emphasis von Wright put on the normative pressure. On reflection I have wondered if the normative pressure, through my interpretations, has been separated incorrectly, from the individual. Looking at the person as governed either by norms or interests, and not taking the interaction and relationship between them into account, is too simple. Perhaps the reflections on establishing the intentions of the agents (p. 21), and the rethinking of normative pressure, would lead to a better understanding of the «inner side» of the action than I imagined at first? As regards this, I have already expressed some difficulties related to the particular issue of interpreting the intellectual component. It is beginning to be a little clearer.

Beyond the difficulties I have expressed, I think von Wright's combination of explaining (tied to facts) and understanding (tied to norms) the human action is a very attractive feature from the perspective of developing nursing history. Seeing the interpretation as a result of both describing and explaining (asking the *meaning* and the *causes* of the action) is in my view a strength that can be utilized most fruitfully in developing theories within nursing history.

I am also fascinated by von Wright's way of drawing inductive inferences in the interpretations of the historical records. In the first place, it is a way of contributing to the establishment of credibility; in addition it challenges the creativity, the empathy and the intellect of the scholar in an exciting way.

The choice of an historical biographical approach indicates an intention of understanding human actions of social relevance from a social and interactive point of view, and also within an individual

context of a life course (Furre, 1986 p. 66). In my opinion, von Wright would go far towards contributing to the attainment of this objective.

POSTSCRIPT

The introduction to von Wright and his assumptions of the human action has been both demanding, strenuous and exciting. It has made me aware of several problems connected to the application of the historical method, and particularly attentive to the importance of methodological considerations. I have also been reminded of the significance of *objectivity*, and all the consequences linked to this concept.

I must admit that almost equally as challenging as the meeting with von Wright, has been the challenge of writing in English. To express oneself in another language, and to get the intended meaning across, has really been a trial. This has been an even more formidable task given the complexity of the subject matter and the particular, and little debated, angle I have selected. Summing up, however, it has been a very informative process in every possible way.

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