

Knowledge and Power in Discourses on Body and Health¹

NamSun Kim, SookJa Song² and KyuEun Lee

*Department of Nursing, Catholic Kwandong University
Beomil-ro 579beon-gil, Gangneung-si, Gangwon-do, Korea
Corresponding Author: bnssj@cku.ac.kr*

Abstract

This study attempted to determine the practice of various powers of life that penetrate the discourses on health and pursue the direction that must be followed by nurses. Florence Nightingale expanded nursing, which traditionally was the role of women at home, to the society; since then, nursing has secured its place as a specialized profession in health. Can nursing continue to grow as a powerful profession? Foucault disclosed the concept of power not in the sense of force or coercion, but in the sense of discourse domination that induces people to naturally practice in daily life. Accordingly, this study verified the implications in the perspective and strategies of nursing science by discussing the power of discourse that penetrates body and health through analysis of health-related texts.

Keywords: *Discourse, Health, Power*

1. Introduction

As Korean society recently shows an increased average life span and enters the aging society based on rapid economic growth, 'health' has become an important topic of daily life and is regarded as a prerequisite for a happy life. Various forms of media are pouring out countless discourses on health through the words and texts of orthodox and unorthodox health experts. Significantly, since the implementation of the comprehensive programming channels in 2010, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of health-related programs combined with entertainment, as well as the number of health care providers on TV enthusiastically discoursing upon health [1]. Perceived by the general public as experts dealing with life, these people have a strong voice about body and health, and the discourses on health that they have created act as some kind of power and exert a considerable influence on individuals and society.

The problem is that these discourses are not a neutral language system that fully reflects the reality as it is; rather, they have an ideological character that affects individual life by defining certain lifestyles as desirable [2].

Who is the main agent that creates discourses on healthy body or health? Why is health or body objectified? How much are powerful discourses on health or nursing pouring out to the society?

Medicine has been a science-based discipline since modern science began to develop rather than settle based on the traditional medicine.

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² * Corresponding author: SookJa Song

Department of Nursing, Catholic Kwandong University
Beomil-ro 579beon-gil, Gangneung-si, Gangwon-do, Korea
E-mail: bnssj@cku.ac.kr

Florence Nightingale overcame the strict gender ideology and expanded nursing, which was an unwelcome occupation at the time, to the society, contributing greatly to developing nursing into a health profession. In the 21st century, nursing has become an academic field that many young people want to specialize in, as well as a health profession they want to be devoted to with all their passion for life.

Let's leave out Nightingale's excellent vision, insight in nursing, devoted action, and pioneering contributions from the discussion. It is true that there is some skepticism about whether she could have upgraded nursing to a real occupation, with social praise beyond the discourse on gender ideology in the Victorian Age where the roles of men and women were strictly distinguished, even if she was from a poor underprivileged class. This is because we know there were nurses like Joanna Bridgeman or Mary Seacole [3] who, despite their remarkable contributions like Nightingale in the Crimean War, were overshadowed because they were not from the upper class. We are aware through Michel Foucault's discussion about power that when an occupation rises in a society or an individual has great and powerful influence, this is not just a reward of an individual's or an organization's indomitable efforts, achievements or knowledge [4]. According to Foucault, the human body is the base where power and knowledge are constantly produced [5], and thus body and health are not pure biological subjects but political, economic, and sociocultural constructs, which are especially determined by dominant discourses.

Accordingly, this study will explore why these discourses are created and why health and body are objectified by analyzing health-related texts. The analysis focuses on identifying major agents of constructing discourses on health or body, important discursive objects and the newly constructed knowledge. Thus, it will reflect on the perspectives of nurses in discourses on health and explore the strategies for discourses on health in nursing.

2. Research Method

This study will analyze the mechanism and intentions that penetrate the discourses on health covered by mass media, using French philosopher Michel Foucault's discourse analysis framework. That is, by applying Foucault's framework of discourse and genealogical method to the discourse on health and body, we can then analyze the meaning and structure of health discourse in newspaper articles.

In particular, it is focused on interpreting the meaning and mechanism of text instead of technically analyzing the language of discourse itself. Since the analyzed texts were chosen merely for research purposes, the sources are marked anonymous to avoid intervention of other value judgments.

3. Research Findings and Discussions

Recently, as comprehensive programming channels like cable TV, satellite broadcasting and IPTV aside from newspapers or public TV are becoming more and more popular, we are encountering news and educational or entertainment programs overflowing with discourses on health. Some prime time news programs even have a fixed session in which a medical reporter reports health issues and provides expert analysis. Countless discourses on health are introduced and distributed. Some are overwhelmingly practiced by the public in life, some disappear after a temporary fad, and some die out without gaining any power at all. It is clear that the difference is not determined by the standard of whether the relevant discourse is scientific or not. Foucault viewed knowledge and power as two things that move in association; that is, power operates within knowledge, and power requires the form of knowledge for domination. Thus, there is a need for production and distribution of discourses that form knowledge in order to establish power. In this case, it is impossible to exert any kind of power without

producing the discourse of truth [6]. If there is a discourse on health that is widely accepted and voluntarily practiced by the public, this is something that the public is convinced of as the truth, which is no doubt something beyond just power of knowledge. For example, the medical discourses on health are spread by doctors approved as highly specialized health experts, thus connoting the premise that they might be scientific, and are accepted as the truth in many cases. The truth value is further enhanced if the mass media mediates the medical discourses on health and the public. In other words, discourses are formed by the media, displaying force in our daily lives as power as they are distributed and consumed [5].

Thus, this study will explore the issues of knowledge and power that penetrate the texts related to discourses on health.

3.1. Will Wearable Devices Only Provide Health Care and Treat Diseases?

‘A variety of wearable devices are already released in the field of healthcare. ... Currently there are devices that detect health conditions such as temperature and heart rates, showing a stronger tendency of preventive health care; but as time passes, they will be more widely used in terms of disease management,’ he said.

Wearable devices are not used diversely in Korea today, but the global trend is heading towards the development of wearable devices that can also treat diseases.

With the development of wearable devices, the times have come in which we can measure all our activities and manage them accurately,’ said a healthcare official. ‘In addition to personal health care, we can also measure sanitary control of the medical team or the numbers of accesses to hospital rooms, which will help change the hospital culture. Devices that can diagnose diseases and administer drugs are also under research, allowing us to innovatively manage diseases in the near future.’ – excerpt from a daily newspaper article in September 2014 –

... ‘Wearable computer’ or ‘intra-oral computer’ technology is receiving attention because of its synchronization with smartphones. The sensor attached to the teeth collects data on all human behaviors and diseases through the mouth such as type and amount of food eaten, balance of oral bacteria, snoring and sleep apnea in sleep, malocclusion, asthma or coughing. This data is sent to smartphones and then to the doctors, crucially helping people solve countless problems such as diet, taking nutrition, oral health, snoring, etc. Advanced digital technology such as 3D printing or intra-oral sensor will soon be used in various methods for not only oral health but also health of the whole body.’ – excerpt from the blog of a daily newspaper in January 2014 -

Wearable computers are no longer just a virtual scenario, but a reality in various places in the world. That is, wearable computers detect and load tremendous health data of individuals, sending them through smartphones on a real-time basis. These data are immediately analyzed and used for preventive health care as well as treatment of diseases. If wearable computers become universalized, it will be possible to randomly check the functions and forms of each organ, which will enable early diagnosis of many diseases. Micro medical devices loaded with a computer will crisscross the human body and provide immediate treatment and surgery.

Then, can wearable devices free the human race from diseases and guarantee healthy life and happiness?

If we adopt Foucault’s explanation about surveillance power to wearable devices, we cannot deny the possibility that wearable devices will act as a holistic power of surveillance in the form of a small yet strong panopticon. Since private matters like individual physical conditions, diseases, and lifestyles are fully detected and turned into a database, no one can guarantee that these data will be used only in preventing and treating diseases. This is because there are currently no standards or guidelines regarding health information, medical devices, and user interface [7]. That is, as our body is reverted to an information system and regarded as a matter that can be decoded/recoded, separated,

organized, translated, edited, and programmed, it is being transformed into a variable existence that can be constantly modified, remodeled, transformed, set up, reinforced, and created [8]. Accordingly, scholars such as Virilio (2007) expressed concerns over the phenomenon of 'internal colonization of the human body'. Therefore, there is a need for a serious contemplation and reflection on how nursing can support individuals' rights to body and free options in the politics of body in this evolved digital era.

3.2.1. Does a Pregnant Woman's Management of Body Shape Prevent Obesity of the Child to be Born?

Childhood obesity is caused by various factors such as the remarkable improvement of the nutritional environment, as well as dietary habits, lifestyles and heredity. But the excessive weight increase of the mother in pregnancy and the birth weight of the newborn baby also have a significant effect. ... Recently there are specialized body shape clinics for pregnant women in order to prevent their obesity. The clinics provide xx and xx to help pregnant women manage their body shape and facilitate their childbirth, and also offer body shape diagnosis, nutritional management, body type xx and therapy for the whole body and different parts, and ultrasonic waves and high frequency procedures after childbirth. "Pregnant women can prevent their own obesity as well as their children's, by watching their weight in the clinic, says director OO. "It's good to get help from a specialized organization." – excerpt from a daily newspaper article in January 2014 –

It is undeniable that there is a need for strict management of children's westernized diets and lifestyles in preventing childhood obesity. But it is considered fundamentally important for women of childbearing age to maintain optimal weight and for pregnant women to adequately increase their weight [10]. Thus, it is clear that adequate weight control in pregnancy is an important factor for preventing childhood obesity. But according to related texts, the focus is not on weight control but management of body shape. In other words, as the emphasis is on management of body shape, people pay more attention to beauty than exercising or nutrition for optimal weight increase, instigating all kinds of surgical procedures or therapy. Pregnant women are likely to internalize these discourses for the sake of their children's healthy future, voluntarily following them by paying a lot of money. Why is the traditional and eco-friendly knowledge for body care in pregnancy and childbirth neglected in Korea?

This is a good example that shows the possibility that the body may be dominated by the commercial system combined with medical treatment. With regard to how power can penetrate and control body, Lee (2013) stated that power forms a relationship with individuals through various devices as the media, and as the level of the media gets higher, power tends to mobilize sophisticated discursive and non-discursive devices rather than the violence of prohibition. Furthermore, power penetrates and produces the body of individuals by dragging out the logic of positivity and self-improvement from the public, making body function as part of the network of power. Thus, power is none other than holistic bio-power that tries to control human life and existence.

3.2.2. A Slim Woman is More Competitive?

Many women go on a diet to wear skimpy clothes in a beautiful way in summer. However, if you don't figure out your body type properly and excessively go on a diet, you may gain more weights or damage your health due to the yo-yo effect. In addition, women need to accurately know about physical changes by hormone or the characteristics of women's body type. The patients with macromastia, who have big breasts, are likely to be obese on their upper body with lacking exercise capacity due to the weight of the breast. In this case, it is important to have treatment to reduce the size of breast before going on a diet. If you put on weight on your lower body, you need to stimulate blood circulation in your leg veins and maintain your leg conditions to get rid of edema.

Director xx said that “if you repeat the failure while you try to continue weight loss without properly knowing your body type, it will be more difficult to lose weight next time.” and “in this case, you may effectively correct your body shape if you have the liposuction in a way that is suitable for your body type or take the procedures using the tools.”

He also mentioned that “the effective procedure for many of those who fail to lose weight is liposuction. It reduces the number of fat cells by absorbing the cells and if the number of the fat cells reduces from liposuction, it is less likely to gain weight again.” and “liposuction helps care the body parts that hardly lose weight like abdominal area, thigh, forearm and side.” He added that “liposuction is also effective when you hardly lose weight or have imbalance of body type. If you are severely obese, your body shape can be corrected with the whole body liposuction that eliminates the fat of the entire body at a proper proportion.”

Director xx pointed out that it is important to shape the body line in liposuction by properly getting rid of the fat per body part after considering the balance of the body shape and the hospitals with many experiences of the procedure have low failure rate. If you are uncomfortable with liposuction or need additional obesity treatment, you may correct your body shape with the procedure using all kinds of equipment or injection or medicine treatment. After the procedure regarding body shape, you should quickly release the destroyed fat cells and make strenuous efforts to maintain the slimmed body shape with exercise.’ – excerpt from a daily newspaper article in June 2015-

The criterion for beautiful body shape differs depending on the time period. Not long ago, women with younger faces and voluptuous bodies (so-called Bagel girls) were regarded as most beautiful. Now, skinny women who enjoy exercising are receiving the spotlight. Like such, SNS and mass media continue to change and imprint the standard of a beautiful body shape and the body has become an object to be constantly cared for.

According to the above text, in an effort for women to get in shape, medical interventions like liposuction are induced as if they are a natural process, beyond the existing diet control or exercise. The equipment using procedures, injection treatment or medicine treatment are introduced as an additional method to quickly correct the body shape, as a trivial matter not different from getting medicine and being vaccinated to cure the cold. The text touches nothing else but getting in shape. It does not contain anything else such as personal history of body, concerns about health, or considering an autonomous choice for your body.

Craving for a slimmer body is based on the formulation ‘slim body=feminine body=competitive body’, and the slim body in this formula is a gendered body, which is proposed as an ideal ‘feminine body’ and serves as a symbol to combine it with a competitive capitalized body [12].

The medical discourse linked to commercial power has huge social consequences and influences. Although the medical community is known to make efforts of self-purification after sensing the danger in such phenomenon, it is doubtful how effective the effort is. Lee (2006) said that the body control power of bio power refers to as being increased after making the body itself as a microscopic power and showing its effect. The body becomes the actor/producer that exercises the power, and it means to be incorporated into the matrix of the power relations surrounding the body. In other words, individuals decide and censor their body by the standard of body information offered in mass media or SNS and agree with the way that the knowledge in discourse recognize or sense an abnormality and become willing to improve their body by themselves or try the information out.

3.3 Will Scientific Technology Make the Dream of Eternal Life Come True for Humans?

oooo (age 67), a director of a global conglomerate, is taking 100 pills of about 70-80 types of nutritional supplements every day, the amount of which is worth 1.1 billion KRW a year.

His plan for eternal life consists of three steps. A longevity diet is Step 1 toward eternal life. This is the means to maintain health until Step 2 in which bio-technology can redesign genomes, and Step 3 in which molecular nanotechnology can regenerate human organs and tissues. He expects to reach Step 3 in 20-25 years, which is when he reaches the age of late 80s to early 90s. If biotechnology continues to develop according to his expectations, this scenario is not entirely impossible considering the recent trend in life extension' – excerpt from a daily newspaper article in April 2015 –

He is trying out this eternal life project by his own personal choice under the belief that the knowledge of genome will achieve a striking development. If the influence of genes is significantly reduced by the development of biotechnology, it does not seem impossible to have a healthy eternal life. In fact, despite his age of 67, he is maintaining a biological age in the late 40s, thanks to his health food diet and nutritional supplements.

Kim and Kim (2013) pointed out that our body is vested in the dynamics of IT systems interworked with the development of capitalism in this advanced technology era, and explained this under the paradigm of the power of biotechnology, which is one step more advanced than Foucault's power of body (Figure 1).

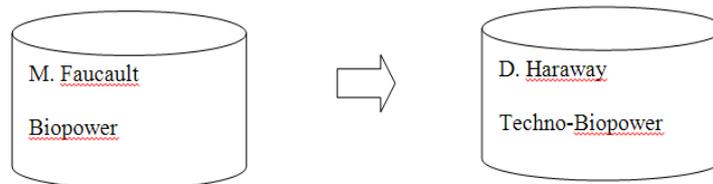


Figure 1. Paradigm Shift in Understanding of Body Power

The power of the body will lead to the issue of social justice and health inequality in the future, and we can easily predict that there will be complicated politics of life around the body over who will have the control power for human body. This is because the achievement-oriented modern society that is functionally divided tends to socially adjust, control, or eliminate phenomena that are regarded as functionally unnecessary and unproductive, such as diseases, aging, and death [13].

Foucault had initially viewed the body not as that of an individual, but as that of an individual in the social body. Individuals in the social body are outputs of microscopic relations such as rules, norms, and political regulations, and an individual in the social body is another name for the body subordinate to the society [14]. Power of life is an ensemble of mechanisms that drag the fundamental biological elements of the human species into the general strategies of politics and power. Foucault's analysis of power is ultimately related to the governance of humans. The nature of ruling aims at human behavior [15].

Nursing science has long been understanding the human body according to causal and biomedical models, and believed that discourses on the body are results of the scientific progress of medicine. Nursing should reveal the reality of scientific practice and justification of scientific knowledge, which are hidden by medical science and objectivism based on the positivism.

However, we must be aware that the body cannot historically form the independent category of understanding, and its method of existence has shown completely different aspects according to time [16]. Today, the body is not just an individual concept; it has transformed from the object that expresses individual identity to distinguish one from

others, to the battlefield of power in discourses that imperceptibly control the daily life. For example, in the society where looks have become an individual's social competitiveness, there are constant efforts to create a body demanded by the trends, either consciously or unconsciously; and in this reality, individuals no longer live as the main agent of their own body.

We should not consider power to be something from rifle or knife nor legal force to exercise as we want, but the strategic relationship to be exercised at the level of technique and practice of social institution. In other words, power is fundamentally pervasive in the institutionalized normal behavior. Therefore, we need to notice the intention of those who argue that their only domain is cool-headed science and neutral value, and be able to figure out the strategies of the dominant discourse that considers knowledge and experiences of others to be nonscientific and inferior.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This study begins from skepticism over the discourses on body and health that are pouring out indiscreetly. To this end, a critical analysis of Foucault's power of discourse was used.

Foucault had studied historical evidence how our body was involved in power using archeology and genealogy based on historical resources. He examines the institutionalization of knowledge and the power exerted thereby, with special reference to the devices of social regulation and their function over the madness, the disease, the crime, and the sexuality. In other words, he showed a new way of introspection about the functioning relationship between knowledge and power and suppression. He described how knowledge became collusive with then dominant ideologies and legalized itself and exercised power as a discourse. At the center, there was the human body.

As a result of analyzing the discourses on body and health, it was found that distributing the discourses on health as the texts of media provided a clue for us to look into how power is executed. It was found that the body is faced with a crisis in which it is divided, deconstructed and processed in association with commercial systems combined with medical treatment or biotechnological power of body. The body is in danger of receiving ruling holistic power of surveillance in the form of a small yet strong panopticon.

Nursing started to be ousted from medical science as a peripheral study in medical history, as the treatment behaviors based on medicine and engineering as a science (such as bacteriology or pathology) on the basis of empiricism emerged as a modern knowledge power in the post-modern era [17].

Thus, nurses should be alert to the discourse of power over the body. This study realistically examines various powers around body and health, and reflects on the perspectives within the field of nursing science; accordingly, this study verified that it is necessary to examine what nursing science must do as an advocate of life, and whether it can be the main agent that creates powerful discourses.

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Authors



Namsun Kim, is a professor from the Nursing Department at the Catholic Kwandong University, where she has been working since 1995. She received her B.S. from Ewha Womens University in 1985, and her M.S. from the Ewha Womens University in 1987. She received her DNsc. from Ewha Womens University in 1994. From 1991 to 1994, she worked at Young Dong College as professor. Her research interests are focused on the effects of nursing intervention in middle-aged women. Also, she is interested the improvement of student's personal growth initiative with enneagram.



SookJa Song, is a professor from the Nursing Department at Catholic Kwandong University, where she has been working since 2014. She received her B.S. from Chodang University in 1999, and her M.S. from the Seogang University in 2002. She is on a break from her doctoral degree. From 1985 to 2004, she worked at Incheon St. Mary Hospital as a nurse and director. Her research interests are focused on the effects of nursing intervention in old age. Also, she is interested in nursing administration.



KyuEun Lee, is a professor from the Nursing Department at Catholic Kwandong University, where she has been working since 1998. She received her B.S. from Korea University in 1983, and her M.S. from the Korea University in 1985. She received her Ph.D. in Nursing Science from the Catholic University of Korea in 1998. From 1985 to 1998, she worked at Dong-U college and Gangneung Yeongdong University as professor. Her research interests are focused on women's health and nursing intervention. In education, she has worked on the Fundamental of Nursing and Women's health nursing.