

# Postmodernism, COVID-19 Pandemic, and Life of Nurses: Boundaries of Individual Rights and Social Responsibilities: Systematic Review

## Postmodernizm, COVID-19 Pandemisi ve Hemşirelerin Yaşamı: Bireysel Haklar ve Sosyal Sorumlulukların Sınırları: Sistemik Derleme

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**ABSTRACT** Postmodernism paradigms have improved nursing knowledge, at least in research and theory development. However, after the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, we realized some crucial negative elements of postmodernism, like leaving preventive measures and vaccination to individuals' decisions, which may endanger nurses' and medical staff's lives. During the pandemic, nurses were dissatisfied with the authorities' poor performance in providing facilities, equipment, medication, vaccines, and legislation of effective primary prevention measures. Also, they were disappointed with peoples' careless behavior in wearing masks, keeping social distance, and avoiding crowdings. COVID-19 also revealed the differences in perception of individual rights and social responsibility, which may profoundly affect the lives of people and health workers. Balancing individual rights and social responsibility is crucial in a community of individuals of different backgrounds, orientations, and interests. The dominant paradigm of postmodernism among some nations and politicians postponed decision-making regarding prevention measures or even their necessity which cost thousands of lives, including the lives of nurses and doctors. Leaving the use of personal protective equipment, holding meetings, and vaccination to the will of people were all in light of postmodernist thoughts that say no one has the right to restrict others' freedom. The health staff expects policymakers to meet their concerns and back them up by passing laws balancing individual rights and social responsibility. This article aimed to open a novel discussion around the impact of postmodernist thoughts on the safety and life of nurses and medical staff during the pandemics and their expectations from lawmakers for future confrontations.

**ÖZET** Postmodernizm paradigmaları, hemşirelik bilgisini en azından araştırma ve teori gelişiminde ilerletmiştir. Ancak koronavirüs hastalığı-2019 (COVID-19) pandemisi sonrasında, hemşirelerin ve sağlık çalışanlarının hayatını tehlikeye atabilecek, koruyucu önlemleri ve aşılınmayı bireylerin kararına bırakmak gibi postmodernizmin bazı çok önemli negatif elementleri olduğunu fark ettik. Pandemi süresince hemşireler, yetkililerin tesis, ekipman, ilaç, aşı ve etkili birincil koruyucu önlemleri sağlamadaki zayıf performanslarından hoşnut kalmamışlardır. Aynı zamanda, insanların maske takma, sosyal mesafeyi koruma ve kalabalıktan kaçınma gibi konulardaki dikkatsizliğinden dolayı hayal kırıklığına uğramışlardır. COVID-19 ayrıca, insanların ve sağlık çalışanlarının hayatlarını derinden etkileyebilecek, bireysel haklar ve sosyal sorumluluk algılarındaki farklılıkları ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bireysel haklar ve sosyal sorumluluğu dengelemek, farklı geçmiş, yönelim ve ilgi alanları olan bireylerden oluşan bir toplumda çok önemlidir. Bazı uluslar ve politikacılar arasındaki postmodernizmin baskın paradigmaları, koruyucu önlemlere ve hatta hastalığın doktorlar ve hemşireler dahil binlerce cana mal olmasını önleyecek önlemlerin alınmasını gerektiriliğine yönelik kararlar verilmesini geciktirmiştir. Kişisel koruyucu ekipman kullanımının, toplantı düzenlenmenin ve aşılmanın insanların iradesine bırakılması, "Hiç kimsenin başkalarının özgürlüğünü kısıtlama hakkı yoktur" diyen postmodernist düşüncelerin ışığındadır. Sağlık çalışanları politikacıların, endişelerini gidermelerini ve bireysel hakları ve sosyal sorumluluğu dengeleyen kanunlar çıkararak onlara arka çıkma- larını beklemektedir. Bu makale, pandemi süresince hemşirelerin ve sağlık çalışanlarının hayatları ve güvenlikleri hakkında postmodernist düşüncelerin etkisi konusunda ve milletvekillerinden gelecekteki çatışmalar için beklentileri hakkında yeni bir tartışma açmayı amaçlamıştır.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism; human rights; social responsibility; nursing; COVID-19

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Postmodernizm; insan hakları; sosyal sorumluluk; hemşirelik; COVID-19

With coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19), hospitals dealt with equipment shortages, medication, staff, and financial challenges.<sup>1-4</sup> Nurses faced an increased demand for pandemic-related care, ranging from mobile COVID-19 testing to high-acuity care

in intensive care units. Though there are no comprehensive studies to address all aspects of the nurse's life and work affected by COVID-19, it is clear that they were under crushing pressure. They felt exhausted by the increased workload, fear of death, and

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transmitting a fatal disease to their family members.<sup>4</sup> They are dissatisfied with the authorities' poor performance in providing facilities, equipment, medication, vaccines, and legislation of effective primary prevention measures. Also, they are disappointed with peoples' careless behavior in wearing masks, keeping social distance, and avoiding crowdings.<sup>5,6</sup>

Besides these, there were concerns, rumors, and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines limiting vaccination coverage and endangering the lives of nurses, health staff, and the general population.<sup>7</sup> An outbreak of this extent, with a high economic burden and mortality, will impact the future of medicine, nursing, and dominant paradigms. One of these paradigms is the balance between individual rights and social concerns, rooted in conflicts between modernism and postmodernism. Therefore, first, we will briefly review these paradigms and their impact on nursing and medicine.

## MODERNISM AND NURSING

In philosophy, modernism's essentials are rooted in the thoughts of Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, and John Locke for their influence upon epistemology. It started in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and influenced various areas such as economy, politics, technology, literature, and specifically education in line with the industrial revolution and enlightenment age.<sup>8</sup> Modernist thinkers emphasized realism, objectivism, autonomy, individualization, and capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

Realism attempts to objectively depict life without idealization, didactic or moral ends.<sup>10</sup> Objectivism holds that one reality exists independent of anyone perceiving it; humankind is capable of knowing this reality only by reasoning and objective knowledge.<sup>11</sup> The term autonomy literally refers to regulation by the self. People are more deeply engaged and productive when autonomously functioning, generating human capital and wellness.<sup>12</sup> These dominant paradigms of the enlightenment era led to fact-based investigations, considered the only valid route to knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Modernist thinkers, e.g., Isaac Newton and James Watt, laid the foundations of significant branches of science. Developments in medicine increased human longevity significantly. Medical sci-

entists discovered vaccines and established separate branches of medicine, and consequently, the mortality rate declined dramatically.

As to nursing, modern nursing comes back to the works of Florence Nightingale in mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. As an empirical researcher, she gathered evidence-based data regarding health and sanitary conditions in Crimea and England.<sup>13</sup> She addressed fundamental problems, embedded these data into nursing knowledge, and shifted nursing from a traditional superstitious care model into modern, evidence-based care. Evidenced-base nursing and almost all aspects of contemporary nursing might consider as empirical consequences of modernism in nursing.

## POSTMODERNISM AND NURSING

Postmodernism is notoriously slippery and, by definition, almost impossible to define.<sup>14,15</sup> It may be described as a sociocultural picture of the contemporary world.<sup>16</sup> While modernism is based on objective knowledge, postmodernism is based on the theory of relativity, implying that reality will change according to time, place, and culture.<sup>8</sup> It rejects the entire modernism project and attacks its basic paradigms like reasoning, objectivity, realism, individualism, capitalism, liberal government, science, and technology.<sup>9</sup> Instead of experience and reason with modernists, there is linguistic and social subjectivism with postmodernists.<sup>17</sup> Postmodernists are quite skeptical and ambiguously say anything. To them, the reality is unknown behind the veil of our assumptions, preconceptions, and definitions.<sup>18</sup> Postmodernism celebrates diversity and contingent or situated meaning and rejects universal solutions. To postmodernists, anything goes and nothing is certain.<sup>16</sup>

For influential postmodern thinkers, truth is a political issue created by "belief communities", neither rational nor objective. Many postmodernists believe that Western communities justify dominance, power, prisons, prohibitions, the selection process, and the public good in the name of reason, truth, and reality. According to Foucault, speaking in the name of- or against- reason, truth, or knowledge is meaningless. He wrote "reason" is the ultimate language of madness; there is nothing to guide our thoughts and

feelings; therefore, we can do or say whatever we feel.<sup>9</sup> They reject the authority of reason and say there is no such a thing as certainty.<sup>19</sup> This view rejects the independently existing reality and denies “reason” or any other method to acquire objective knowledge. The consequence of this approach is relativism, acknowledging that different views of reality or contradictory answers to questions can be equally valid.<sup>15</sup>

As to medicine, despite its opposing arguments, e.g., around evidence-based practice, postmodernism has many positive impacts, including bringing the concepts of justice and equity in education and treatment.<sup>20</sup> Nurses, particularly nursing researchers, have shown a great interest in postmodernism. Reed believed that although modern science enlightened the world, its approach failed to deliver the anticipated empirical base for ultimate meaning and truth about the human being and the world.<sup>21</sup> Zardosh advocated postmodernism challenges regarding the modernist idea of a single transcendent sense of reality and agreed with its emphasis on plurality, respect for cultural and individual differences, relativism of truth or reality, and listening to different voices.<sup>22</sup> Allen and Ellaway pointed to the positive impact of postmodernism in the education of nursing and medicine. They acknowledged its emphasis on multiple truths, exposing cultural differences and systemic problems of justice and equality.<sup>20,23</sup> Some also believe that postmodernism improved nursing research methodology, mainly qualitative research and theory development, practice, and nursing knowledge.<sup>21,24-26</sup>

There are also many dissenting opinions. Some nursing researchers critiqued postmodernism’s relativism, which may reject religious belief or even science as a valid way of understanding specific issues.<sup>15</sup> Others critiqued its positive role in nursing knowledge development, its rejectionist approach to evidence-based nursing, directing nursing toward goallessness and nihilism, and deconstructing the present knowledge without restructuring it.<sup>15,24,27,28</sup>

## RESPONSIBILITY FOR COVID-19 RELATED PROBLEMS

To left-wing politicians and postmodernists, these are drawbacks of the modernism paradigm and

capitalism. Davis and Wallace wrote such a pandemic was inevitable because of industrialized intensified agriculture, wildlife trafficking, hyper-globalization, degradation of public health systems, and big-pharma-dominated research.<sup>29,30</sup> According to Sheehan, capitalism led to class-based access to healthcare and profit-based research priorities.<sup>31</sup>

To the opponents of the postmodernist, its approach makes issues more complicated. Lindstrom critiqued the Swedish strategy for COVID-19 and wrote: “overconfidence in herd immunity, individual responsibility in wearing the mask and keeping social distancing, and neglect to coordinate with the World Health Organization and other countries may be associated with postmodernism values”.<sup>32</sup> Andrae et al. mentioned the example of South Africa in combating human immunodeficiency virus. They pointed to the conspiracy theories of postmodernists, even by some university professors, who claimed the CIA deliberately separated the virus as a biological weapon to control the African population, leading to withholding anti-retroviral medication from the citizen for years and increased mortality rate.<sup>33</sup> A similar situation occurred in Iran when the supreme religious leader banned purchasing and administering any anti-COVID vaccine from the origin of the United States or the United Kingdom. The same happened in some other countries regarding the necessity of wearing masks, social distancing, and stay-home recommendations even by presidents.<sup>34</sup>

## CONCLUSION: INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES, LIFE OF NURSES, AND COVID-19

Individual rights, according to Gardner, refer to the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as long as an individual respects the same right in others.<sup>35</sup> In a community of individuals of different backgrounds, orientations, and diverse interests, the need to harmonize these individual rights in a collective sense is a social responsibility. Therefore, social responsibility refers to the ethical obligation to act for the benefit of society.<sup>36</sup>

According to the principle of individual rights, nobody can force a man to devote his life to the hap-

piness of others. It further means the collective cannot decide against the individuals' will.<sup>35</sup> This view, which is quite in accordance with the postmodernism paradigm, is the foundation of rising doubts about the necessity of wearing a face mask, social distancing, and vaccination, and raised street demonstrations against the COVID-19 restrictions. It cost hundreds of thousands of deaths globally and made most health staff and nurses disappointed in the assistance of the authorities and public support.

As to nursing, postmodernism, unfortunately, provides no answer to some basic questions like if we leave vaccination, preventive measures, and treatment to individuals' decisions, who will be responsible for the consequences? What is the boundary between individual rights and social responsibility considering the health disasters like COVID-19? Who and how must compensate for the economic burden, deaths, and safety of nurses, physicians, and the entire public? And how we can expect nurses and medical staff to scarify their lives to benefit a society that ignores their safety and health in future outbreaks.

We do not know what time will bring us. Still, I am sure that the concerns of nurses and health workers are serious, waiting for the right decisions of politicians and thinkers to find a balance between in-

dividual rights and social responsibility. There is some good news! Some healthcare systems in the United States mandate the COVID-19 vaccine for workers.<sup>37</sup> There are considerations about the legality of these regulations; though the number of health settings mandate vaccination is rising, even some staff have asked the courts to stop the regulations. In some states of the USA, even the court employees were asked to get vaccinated mandatory.<sup>38</sup> This raises hope and may serve as a base for other healthcare systems and nations to pass coherent legislation.

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*No conflicts of interest between the authors and / or family members of the scientific and medical committee members or members of the potential conflicts of interest, counseling, expertise, working conditions, share holding and similar situations in any firm.*

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*This study is entirely author's own work and no other author contribution.*

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