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Publisher *Routledge*
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Health Care for Women International
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713723020

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To cite this Article Thomas, Sandra P.(2006) 'Talking It Over With the Gals: An Analysis of Editorials by Phyllis Stern', Health Care for Women International, 27: 6, 481 — 489
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/07399330600770189
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07399330600770189

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Health Care for Women International, 27:481–489, 2006
Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
ISSN: 0739-9332 print / 1096-4665 online
DOI: 10.1080/07399330600770189

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Talking It Over With the Gals: An Analysis of Editorials by Phyllis Stern

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Editorials written by a journal editor proved a glimpse of that individual's philosophy and opinions about topical events. The purpose of the present project was to analyze the editorials of Phyllis Noerager Stern during the years that she served as editor-in-chief of Health Care for Women International *(1983–2001). Using ethnographic content analysis, 65 editorials were examined to ascertain: (1) what event triggered the editorial; (2) what aim or objective could be identified; and (3) what rhetorical devices the editor employed. Personal narratives and editorials about the abuse/exploitation of women made up the largest categories. Stern's grounded theory orientation, fascination with other cultures, and zest for life were evident throughout the corpus of editorials.*

Having been a subscriber to *HCWI* since its early years, I recall many editorials through which Phyllis Stern made me laugh, ponder, or consider another perspective on an issue. Her editorials were always different from the stodgy and boring editorials in nursing journals that I was accustomed to reading. Early on, I was struck by Dr. Stern's feistiness and candor. What other journal editor has admitted to plastic surgery, financial problems, cultural gaffes, or feeling like a fool? I admired her clever phrasing and intriguing titles, such as "Adam, Take Back Your Rib." Always intelligent and insightful, she also dared to be irreverent, droll, and even a bit risque at times (e.g., "When it comes to money, we have round heels" [Stern, 1997, p. vii]). Therefore, I was delighted to have an opportunity to systematically review Dr. Stern's editorials for this eightieth birthday festschrift. I believe that these written materials provide a unique glimpse into a prominent—and colorful—figure in women's health scholarship.

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BRIEF REVIEW OF THE JOURNAL HISTORY

Carole McKenzie and Sara Cohn cofounded the journal, then named *Issues in Health Care of Women*, in 1979, envisioning its mission as "an organ of continuing education, providing a few research reports, but mostly featuring clinical articles" (Stern, 1994b, p. v). In 1980, Phyllis Stern published a research paper on Filipino childbearing/childrearing issues (coauthored with Virginia Tilden and Eleanor Maxwell), after which she was invited to become an associate editor in 1981. Stern became coeditor in 1982, and editor-in-chief in 1983 (with McKenzie serving as coeditor until 1987). The journal's name was changed to *Health Care for Women International* in 1983 to reflect a new emphasis on international submissions. During the years that Stern served as editor-in-chief, 1983–2001, the journal increased in reputation as well as number of issues published annually. Readers across the globe learned to look forward to the issues as a substantive source of women's health scholarship—and to Stern's fascinating editorials for a chuckle or an "Aha!"

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METHOD

Few exemplars were available to provide me with a model for an analysis of editorials. Some guidance was offered by a recent Australian project, in which the researchers analyzed letters to the editor (Smith, McLeod, & Wakefield, 2005). These researchers referred to their method as ethnographic content analysis (ECA), "an inductive, reflexive analysis of documents focusing on the meaning of text and the emergence of ideas rather than the frequency with which particular terms occur" (p. 1183). The ECA approach seemed well suited to the present analytic task. Textbook authors Waltz, Strickland, and Lenz (2005) also provided some helpful guidance about content analysis. Their chapter on content analysis listed editorials as illustrative of the diverse materials that can be examined using the procedure.

As in any analysis, the first step was to specify the sampling plan. Issues of *HCWI* during the years that Dr. Stern was editor-in-chief (1983–2001) were chosen for scrutiny. Being a subscriber throughout this period, retrieving the editorials was easy: I simply took the journals down from my office shelves and looked through each issue. Abiding by the dictionary definition of editorial (i.e., "an article in a newspaper or other periodical presenting the opinion of the publisher, editor, or editors" [*Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary,* 1989]), chose editorials for inclusion in the analysis if they elucidated Dr. Stern's opinion about a particular topic or issue. Excluded were editorials that were coauthored and those that were solely focused on writing tips or on news about the International Council on Women's Health Issues. The selection process resulted in a sample of 65 editorials (130 pages of text; see the Appendix).

The 65 editorials were first read in their entirety for a sense of the whole, and memos were written about both content and style. Particular words and phrases were highlighted to alert my attention during the more careful line-by-line rereading of the text. Following Smith and colleagues. (2005), I sought to identify (1) what incident or event triggered the editorial; (2) what aim or objective could be identified in the editorial; and (3) what rhetorical devices the editor employed. Agreeing with Sandelowski (2001) that real qualitative researchers *do* count, the editorials were grouped into categories and counted, based on the nature of their content. I also sought to discover any recurring themes across the entire corpus of editorials.

Perspective of the Researcher

At this point, it is only fair to the reader that I disclose my personal acquaintance with Editor Stern. Although Dr. Stern had begun to attract international attention in 1984 when she served as midwife in the birthing of the International Council on Women's Health Issues (ICOWHI), I did not meet her until 1986 when I attended the second ICOWHI conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia. At that meeting, I was elected to the board of directors and served for the next 6 years. After a 4-year hiatus, I again served on the ICOWHI board from 1996 to 2004. This means that Dr. Stern and I spent quite a few hours together in board meetings, which often took place in exotic faraway locales such as Egypt, Thailand, Brazil, and New Zealand. We also spent a little time "off task" sharing meals, sightseeing, or shopping. During those interactions, I came to know Phyllis pretty well. I discovered that she and I had some things in common: passion for writing (and editing), love of travel, and affinity for qualitative research. By reading one of her editorials, I even learned that she, too, names her cars! Her editorial about the "slaughter" of Pearly Mae (by an SUV driver) brought back memories of my sadness at losing faithful chariots Betsy, Gertrude, Mabel, and Alfie. Thus, there is no pretense of "objectivity" in this analysis. I forthrightly acknowledge my fondness for the writer of these editorials. At the same time, however, I take full responsibility for the analysis (she has neither seen it nor endorsed it).

FINDINGS

Talking It Over With the Gals

Personal narratives made up the largest category of editorials ($n = 13$). These pieces seemed almost like entries in a personal journal or informal conversations with women friends. To speak in grounded theory lingo, Stern seemed to be writing as a vehicle for "talking it over with the gals." Here I am drawing from Stern's editorial about the "old gals" (Stern, 1995a). She refers to her classmates from Mount Zion Hospital School of Nursing, with

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whom she bonded during the long student days of split shifts. She calls them "the coming-of-age friends" because they were there "before love affairs, marriages, divorce, motherhood, stepmotherhood, deaths—all that grown-up stuff" (Stern, 1995a, p. v):

> The gals were my life, and in a way they still are.... Somehow I feel an act is incomplete unless I tell the coming-of-age gals about it. (Stern, 1995a, pp. vi–vii)

It occurred to me that maybe creating ICOWHI was a way to expand the network of "old gals" to a global club—and also a way to fulfill Stern's teenage dream of becoming an actress (ICOWHI certainly gave her a place on the world stage).

In this first category of editorials, the writer's aim is to share personal experience. The reader becomes acquainted with the cast of characters that populate Phyllis's life, such as her blind husband Milt (now deceased), his service dog Mel, her daughter Paula, and her good friend Eleanor Krassen Covan (who succeeded her as *HCWI* editor). Sagas of broken ribs and knee replacement surgery find their way into the editorials along with a charming vignette about lunch with Paula at the Russian Tea Room and a heart-wrenching account of scattering the ashes of her husband and his dog in San Francisco Bay on a cold, gray, windy March day in 2001.

Women: An Endangered Species?

Editorials about abuse, exploitation, and inequitable treatment of women, including sexist treatment that Dr. Stern had personally experienced, made up another large category ($n = 11$). If the pieces about women's feminist empowerment ($n = 5$) were included, women's issues would constitute the largest category. Stern wrote about homeless women, drug-addicted women, and so many others who have been relegated to the margins of society. Rereading the older essays from the stance of twenty-first-century political correctness, I found it refreshing to see how unhampered Phyllis was by the stifling PC hegemony that has permeated much of the recent feminist literature. It was also notable, in my view, that Phyllis steadfastly refused to engage in male bashing, another deplorable aspect of some contemporary feminist writing ("I believe that most men are fair minded. Their blindness is learned. Once the barriers are pointed out to them, they often want to kick them over with us" [Stern, 1993a, p. viii]). However, there is a lot of anger in these pieces:

> I grow weary of being considered an unclean vessel—the Catholic Church refuses me the privilege of serving as an altar attendant, and in some parts of the world I am prevented from preparing food during certain days of

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> the month for fear my menstrual flow will poison the meal. In Islamic countries, I must cover myself from view and, unaccompanied by a male companion, am refused service in a restaurant. (Stern, 1993a, p. vii)
>
> Some of us live with overt violence and put up with it. Some of us work with the victims, doing what we can to ease the pain.... Others of us get sick and tired of being the voice of feminism in an otherwise all-male committee, depressed that, in what ought to be an enlightened environment, the decisions go on with little or no input from us. We also get sick and tired of being the voice of feminism in all-female committees; a trait of the oppressed, it is said, is to attack one's own. (Stern, 1986, p. v)
>
> Unless your heart is of steel, there's stuff in here [a special issue on lesbian health] that will bring tears to your eyes. You will be outraged, as I was, at the prejudice, mistreatment, and downright ignorance.... No wonder women are so reluctant to come out as lesbians. (Stern, 1992, p. vi)

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I call the kind of anger shown in these editorials *moral* or *righteous anger* (Thomas, 2004). Such "fire in the belly" often compels writers to take up their pens. These angry editorials continue the tradition initiated by Florence Nightingale, whose indignant and persuasive letters to British newspapers, government commissions, and parliament called for action to address the deplorable health care and living conditions for poor women and children in Victorian England (Monteiro, 1985). Stern acknowledges that her writing also is motivated by a need for revenge: In an editorial about violence against women, she admits, "It enrages us. We want to get even. One way to get even is to write about it" (Stern, 1986, p. v).

Culture Shock Strikes

Thoughtful reflections about other cultures dominated 11 editorials. A closely related category I called "travelogue" ($n = 6$) aimed to enlighten the reader about fascinating places, such as Botswana, where Stern was visiting over the years of her editorship. The phrase "culture shock strikes" was taken from the title of an editorial about the Denmark ICOWHI conference, a meeting that was memorable for its challenges to North American norms and values (Stern, 1993b, p. v). North American blunders, although unintentional, created tension and conflict with the Nordic conference hosts and delegates from less-developed countries.

Stern sought to understand cultural beliefs very different from hers, paths that seemed foreign to her own. As she noted in one editorial, "I know that I am enormously ignorant. But I try to learn: I listen, I ask questions, I observe." Afterward, she shared her observations with us. With an ethnographer's sharp eye for detail, she showed us how what the actors in the scene looked like

and what they were doing. If a scene wasn't pretty, she didn't try to make it so. Here are just a few brief examples:

> The social behavior of men and women in Egypt seems intricately woven.... They seem engaged in a wonderful erotic dance in which women are covered up, are made up, and move with rolling grace, while men strut in their virile intensity, and their eyes dance when they look at women. (Stern, 1994a, pp. v–vi)
>
> The look of all the people in Denmark is a shock. They look like movie stars or models, with their perfect teeth, their flawless skin, their long-legged perfect bodies, striding or biking along. (Stern, 1993b, p. v)
>
> Eddy [a Nova Scotia bootlegger] is hugely fat, and rarely sober. His wife, whom I'll call Heather, is as scrawny as he is fat.... Their home is a one-room cabin.... There is a toilet in the house, but when he gets deeply drunk, Eddy relieves himself off the back porch.... Eddy is great company for drinkers, because he always manages to perform a less socially acceptable act than anyone else. (Stern, 1995b, pp. v–vi)

Precarious Ordering—Higher and Deeper

Editorials about issues of aging ($n = 3$) and the stresses of family caregiving ($n = 6$) forcefully brought home to the reader the agonizing dilemmas many elders are facing (or will face), as their own health, or that of loved ones, deteriorates. "Precarious ordering" is a construct from Judy Wuest's (2001) theory of women's caregiving, which Stern employs in the title of two poignant editorials. Who could fail to be moved as Stern narrates her struggles to care for her blind husband while suffering with an arthritic knee "swollen to the size of a cantaloupe"?

The pressure she was feeling was evident in editorials, such as the following, in which she even enumerated a sort of "to-do" list:

> Two weeks after I meant to, I'm getting this editorial off to Kerry Stanley, the Production Editor. I have to make a series of dental appointments to replace my missing tooth, but between the book on grounded theory Rita and I are editing, the special double journal issue, and other deadlines, I have re-prioritized some of my health care needs...Judy Wuest has it right, ordering for the caretaker turns out to be a precarious process. (Stern, 2000a, p. 357)

Silliness in Academe

Silliness in academe provided the impetus for five editorials. Perhaps because I share similar frustration regarding Phyllis's topics, I especially enjoyed the pieces that pertained to the tyranny of including a figure in one's dissertation

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(as if words are insufficient), the ridiculous "5-year rule" (students being told that their references must be no older than 5 years), and the emphasis on solo publications in promotion and tenure decisions (which devalues the fruitful team approach more typical in contemporary scholarly work).

The World is Ours

Journal history and progress was proudly related in three editorials. Dr. Stern never wanted the journal's audience to be limited to North Americans or to nurses. The journal's international outreach and interdisciplinarity were clearly gratifying to her. In a piece entitled "The World Is Ours," Stern hailed the addition of more than a dozen new associate editors, almost all of them international (Stern, 1991a). In another piece, written in 1994, Stern traced the evolution of *HCWI* from a mama–baby periodical to one with a much broader focus and an ever-increasing supply of solid contributions from scholars of many disciplines. She pointed out that the journal was tackling topics that had been shrouded in secrecy or shame (such as menstruation, lesbian health, and women in the sex industry). Readers got a glimpse of Stern's view of her editorial role:

> It's a highly personal task, this editing. The authors become real to me, as I praise them or chew them out—sometimes silently, sometimes on paper. (Stern, 1994b, p. vi)

Stuff Happens

Two editorials employed grounded theory methodology. Their titles are vintage Stern: "Culture of the Workshop and Its Impact on Immaculate Conception," and "Grounded Theory Analysis of Car Drowning and Women's Health." In the former, Stern analyzes a series of workshops that she conducted with Barney Glaser (Stern, 1998a). In the latter, she tells the reader: "Once a researcher, always a researcher . . . . I began to keep track of the categories, properties, and processes of this event" (Stern, 1995c, p. vi). Ultimately, Stern reports that the basic social process following car drowning is "stuff happens": "It doesn't matter how well one plans—life gets out of control . . . . Car drowning is just an example that stuff happens" (Stern, 1995c, p. vi).

Rhetorical Devices

A master of the pithy epigram, the apt metaphor, and the humorous zinger, Stern never failed to entertain the reader. I'm not sure it is officially termed a "rhetorical device," but she sometimes employed the tactic of writing about a personal matter using a pseudonym. For example, she once wrote in outrage

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about her friend "Laura", who was forced by her university employer to retire at age 65 (Stern, 1991b). Later on, Phyllis revealed that this editorial was actually about herself (fortunately, by then, she had found another university willing to hire her). In an editorial written at age 75, she continued to refer to retirement as a "ghastly idea" (Stern, 2000b, p. 251).

Overarching Themes Across Editorials

Several overarching themes were identified. Not surprisingly for the editor of a women's health journal, deep concern for the status of and well-being of the world's women was displayed throughout this set of Stern editorials. This concern for women is not unique (other editors surely share it), but rather unusual is Stern's way of making an intimate personal connection with female readers. Sometimes, she seemed to be our mother, or an auntie dispensing sage advice to younger mothers and scholars. Sometimes, she was a sister or girlfriend. She wanted to help us, and she wanted us to help one another: "This world needs more of gals helping gals" (Stern's down-home manner of articulating feminist philosophy; Stern, 1998b, p. 177).

Across the pages of text, Stern's fascination with people and places was a consistent element. She taught us that showing respect was the key to crossing cultural barriers.

Likewise, Stern's grounded theory orientation was always evident: "We discovered the social process of producing a conference"; "Rita and I began to develop a grounded theory of safari: Looking for Action"; the culture of a cruise was labeled "constructing an atmosphere of fun." Thus, the analytic wheels were turning even when she was having "fun."

A final theme in the editorials was Stern's zest for life. In an editorial at age 70, she called herself a "young girl/crone," relating that "I feel the same as I did when a young girl—looking to the future, wanting to make new friends, passionate, energetic, and dreamy by turns" (Stern, 1996, p. v). Throughout her seventies, she continued to decry societal ageism and traipse around the world long after many "senior citizens" are expected to slow down. As she herself put it, "I'm going to taste life as long as I can, because even though I come across a salad that's a little off occasionally, for the most part, life is delicious" (Stern, 1994c, p. x). Isn't this a fitting quote with which to toast her on the occasion of her eightieth birthday?

APPENDIX

Editorials included in this analysis follow: Volume 7 (1–2); Volume 7 (6); Volume 8 (2–3), (5–6); Volume 9 (1), (2), (3); Volume 10 (1), (2–3), (4); Volume 11 (1), (2), (3), (4); Volume 12 (1), (2), (3); Volume 13 (1), (2), (3); Volume 14 (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (6); Volume 15 (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (6); Volume 16 (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (6); Volume 17 (2), (4), (6); Volume 18 (1),

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(2), (3), (4), (5), (6); Volume 19 (1), (2), (3), (4), (6); Volume 20 (2), (3), (6); Volume 21 (3), (4), (5), (6), (7), (8); Volume 22 (5), (6), (7).

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