



The Happiest Place in the Hospital; Newborn Nurseries in American Hospitals; A History

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As the grateful recipient of research funding, including a grant from CURF, I was able to spend my summer conducting research for my honors thesis in Health and Societies. With guidance from my fantastic advisor, Dr. Meghan Crnic, and others from the HSSC department, I began working on this project in Spring 2015, and will (hopefully!) turn in my completed thesis this upcoming winter.

I chose to focus my research on the history and sociocultural functions of newborn nurseries in American hospitals. In undertaking this project, my aim is to produce a definitive work on the history and social and cultural functions of newborn nurseries. While much scholarship exists about the medicalization of childbirth and the hospital as a space for new mothers and their babies, there is very little written with particular focus on the nurseries. Understanding newborn nurseries and the purposes that they served for newborns' mothers and family members, hospital visitors, and medical and nursing caregivers is essential to understanding: birth in America, hospital-based pediatric care, visiting culture in healthcare institutions, perceptions of the responsibilities of newborns' parents, and hospital culture as a whole.

I am still processing much of what I found this summer. The use of newborn nurseries, which became commonplace with the trend towards hospitalized childbirth in the first half of the twentieth century and are now largely defunct, was closely linked to prevailing ideas about the roles that medical professionals and parents, specifically mothers, should play during various stages of the childbearing process. I also found that one of the key functions of newborn nurseries was not medical, but, rather, visual. Standard "viewing windows" installed in the walls of most nurseries throughout the country served as key institutions in American hospitals, as parents, family, and friends of newborns, as well as strangers, had the opportunity to view newborn babies through these windows. These windows transformed clinical spaces into opportunities for bonding, entertainment, and purveyors

of happiness. This phenomenon speaks to greater cultural ideas about babies as communal and national property, and is one of a whole host of historical examples of parents and institutions putting babies on display.

Since my project approaches newborn nurseries from a historical perspective, I spent most of my research time visiting archives and libraries, as well as searching online databases for both primary and secondary source materials. I enjoyed this process immensely; I was able to put most of my other responsibilities aside to focus exclusively on reading, learning, and answering questions that perhaps no others before me had thought to investigate. As I continue my education after I graduate from Penn, I am sure that my experiences this summer will serve me well.