



COMMENTARY

Nursing Theory: Contemporary Issues

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The notion and usefulness of nursing theory are constantly challenging. The historical criticism of nursing theory endures into the present. The criticism is based on various issues: There is argument about the notion of nursing science: Is it a basic science or an applied science? (Turkel et al., 2018); there is also argument about the philosophy underpinning the discipline, beliefs about the concepts of the nursing metaparadigm, and the epistemology of nursing: Is it deductive, inductive, or mixed? (Butts et al., 2012). These collectively form the challenges that nurses encounter in the development and application of the theory. Added to that are the international challenges, such as globalization, technological advances, and interdisciplinary care needs. Challenges are not only about the delivery of health care, but are also related to how theories are prepared to meet these dynamic challenges (Throne, 2019).

Nursing-theory development has been affected by various ontological and epistemological perspectives. Furthermore, the emerging technical, political, economic, and global healthcare needs influence nursing-theory development. Generally, nurse scholars have focused on constructing theories and discussing their concepts rather than defending the relevancy and usefulness of nursing theories in real practice. In that discourse, nursing theories are being excluded from nursing education and, consequently, from nursing real practice.

Nursing core disciplinary knowledge is on a slippery slope of limited uses of nursing theory (Turkel et al.,

2018). The misguided and limited application of nursing theory as well as the emphasis on practice are affecting direct patient care and the development of the nursing discipline (Chinn, 2018). According to Butts et al. (2012), using theory in research and practice is needed. Without using theory, nursing will be just a set of procedures rather than an independent profession required by clients and communities.

Historically, it is widely supported that theory utilization presents a structure to nursing knowledge and provides systematic description, prediction, interpretation, and explanation of nursing as it is practiced in the field (Alligood, 2014). Thus, the theory can describe a field and practice using abstract and general ideas. In this sense, theories play a crucial role in defining and explaining the nature of nursing, as well as the goals of nursing practice. They help differentiate nursing from other professions, contributing to the establishment of a clear and unique professional identity.

Evidence-based practice in nursing is recognized as a method to overcome the theory-to-practice gap. It is also an important opportunity for nursing scholars and leaders to disseminate the nursing disciplinary core knowledge to nurses and to the public (Smith, 2019). Together, evidence-based practice and theory might move nursing forward as a well-informed discipline. Regardless of the nursing-theory levels, we might like to argue for an explicit, simple, and clear epistemology of nursing based on an explicit philosophical foundation

instead of the fragmented epistemological perspective that has dropped off the development of theory so far.

The presence of well-established nursing theories distinguishes nursing as a profession rather than as an occupation. When nursing has a robust theoretical foundation, professionals operate autonomously, applying theoretical knowledge to make informed decisions and adhere to ethical standards (Chinn, 2018). Continuous learning and commitment to evolving theoretical frameworks further elevate the nursing discipline to the status of a profession. In contrast, without a deep nursing theoretical foundation, nursing operates with practical skills and routine tasks, resembling an occupation.

Nursing leaders described the nursing discipline knowledge by metaparadigm, philosophies, conceptual models, theories, and empirical research. Thus, the discipline must be continually re-evaluated in terms of theoretical relevancy and scientific findings to contribute directly to the advancement of nursing discipline (Turkel et al., 2018). For that, the discipline must continually be developed by nursing scholars, which means that nursing theory is developed equivalent to the development of nursing education. Thus, nursing needs its theories as part of nursing academic knowledge.

The complexity of nursing identity requires the efforts of practitioners and theorists/ researchers connecting the theory, practice, and research together by utilizing a framework that combines conceptual understanding, theoretical foundations, and empirical evidence in nursing knowledge. In order to guide the nursing knowledge advancement, nursing authors suggested a kind of harmony between theory and practice treated as a unit (Thorne, 2019). The ultimate

goal is to establish a “disciplinary entity”, which functions as a mindset rather than adhering to explicit guidelines or rules. This makes it possible to reflect on multiple levels, including practice, education, and research.

The future of the nursing field and its progress rely on nursing leaders who possess a foundation in disciplinary knowledge. These leaders are equipped to make informed decisions regarding the education of generations, not only in terms of practice or study, but also in terms of understanding the underlying structure of the discipline. As nursing scholars, we continuously strive to capture and embrace the essence that drives our responsibility rather than attempting to confine or define theories. Although we may never definitively articulate what nursing theory is, we can certainly recognize it when we witness it in action.

The topic of nursing theories is a subject of interest and debate in the field of nursing. As nursing scholars, our main goal is to address the issues and propose a path for development. It is crucial to establish a foundation of knowledge within the discipline. In this regard, future advancements in nursing knowledge will be achieved through an interplay between theory and practice guided by philosophy. The aspiration is for nurse scholars to successfully establish a framework for nursing and its education, rooted in both philosophy and theory.

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