



## Achieving Health Equity and Eliminating Health Disparities Based on Nursing Philosophical, Theoretical and Ethical Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Nowadays, there has been a growing emphasis on the topic of health equity, which refers to the fundamental principle of addressing and resolving disparities in health outcomes and the factors that influence them, such as social determinants. The pursuit of health equity entails a dedicated effort towards achieving the utmost level of health and well-being for every individual, while also paying particular attention to those who are most vulnerable to experiencing poor health due to their social circumstances. **Purpose:** This paper aimed to delve deeply into the concepts of health equity and disparities in healthcare from nursing perspectives, exploring various philosophies, theories, and ethical principles. Furthermore, it aimed to highlight the crucial role that nursing professionals play in promoting health equity and eradicating health disparities. **Methods:** A scoping review was conducted to identify relevant international reports and literature published in English, multiple electronic databases including Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), ProQuest, MEDLINE, Google Scholar, SAGE Journals, and PubMed were searched. **Results:** Nursing professionals have a significant role in achieving health equity and eliminating health disparities. Therefore, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of achieving health equity, enhancing caring and healing connections as the core of professional nursing, alongside the use of theory-guided practice approaches, and nursing philosophies. Consequently, professionals in the field are actively seeking more practical methods that incorporate a sense of purpose and significance into their work to achieve equity based on essential nursing philosophies and theories. **Conclusion:** Nurses have a unique and advantageous role in the healthcare system, as they have the ability to make a substantial impact on addressing the underlying factors that contribute to health disparities. Furthermore, nurses work closely with interdisciplinary teams, harnessing the power of collaboration and teamwork to effectively implement a range of strategies aimed at promoting fair and equal access to healthcare for all individuals. **Implications for Nursing:** Nursing professionals have a crucial role in promoting and maintaining health equity, which has been increasingly recognized and emphasized. In addition, they are in a unique position to lead the way in patient care and can make a significant impact in addressing the underlying causes of health disparities by understanding and acknowledging the various factors that influence a person's health and overall well-being.

**Keywords:** Nursing philosophy, Nursing theories, Ethic principles, Health equity, Health disparities.

### What does this paper add?

1. This research paper provides significant and valuable insights that enhance the current knowledge about the importance of nursing profession in promoting health equity and eliminating health disparities among various populations without discrimination.
2. This paper delves into the various dimensions of health equity and disparities through the lens of nursing philosophy, theories and ethical principles. It explores the intersectionality of these concepts and their implications for nursing practice and patient care.
3. By discussing the underlying factors contributing to health disparities, this paper sheds light on the importance of addressing these issues within the healthcare system. Furthermore, through analysis and discussion of current international goals, this paper provides implications and recommendations for promoting health equity and reducing disparities in healthcare delivery.

### Introduction

Over the last two decades, the concept of "health equity" has become more frequently used across public health, research and practice. Health equity entails ensuring that every individual receives an equal and equitable chance to remain as healthy as feasible (Braveman et al., 2018; Shankardass et al., 2012). Furthermore, health equity has been defined by the United States Department of Health and Human Services as reaching the highest achievable degree of health among all individuals (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Furthermore, health disparities refer to a specific form of discrepancy in health outcomes that is intricately connected to social or economic disadvantages. These disparities have a negative impact on certain groups of individuals who have consistently faced greater social or economic barriers to achieving good health due to factors, such as their race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, gender, mental health, cognitive abilities, sensory abilities, physical disabilities, sexual orientation, geographical location, or other characteristics that have a historical association with discrimination or exclusion (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Thus, the eradication of health and healthcare disparities, emphasized along with continuing social

initiatives to address previous and present discrimination, are all necessary for achieving health equity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Furthermore, health equity represents diminishing and eventually eliminating health disparities including the determinants that influence health which disproportionately affect excluded or marginalized populations. Moreover, health disparities and health equity have a direct connection to each other. Therefore, eliminating health disparities is driven by the morality and human right fundamental principle of health equity (Ansell et al., 2021; Braveman, 2014; Braveman et al., 2018; Chin et al., 2018).

In order to achieve health equity, it is imperative that we recognize and prioritize the equal value of every individual. This requires persistent and targeted societal initiatives to tackle avoidable inequities, as well as historical and present injustices that have contributed to the disparities in health and healthcare. The ultimate objective is to ensure that every person is afforded an equal opportunity to reach his/her maximum potential for good health. Unfortunately, a large number of individuals are being denied the chance to attain both physical and mental well-being. Consequently, addressing and eliminating health disparities emerged as a crucial global public-health objective. To illustrate, one of the most significant goals of healthy people in 2030 is that "achieving health and well-being requires eliminating health disparities, achieving health equity, and attaining health literacy". In consistent, The Secretary's Advisory Committee (SAC) for Health and Human Services set a comparable goal of Healthy People 2030 to "achieve health equity and eliminate health disparities.". Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has an ultimate aim and highest priority of ensuring equity in health care, eradicating disparities, as well as enhancing health across all populations. Moreover, according to Healthy People 2030, health equity is defined as "the attainment of the highest level of health for all people".

Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) Commission on Social Determinants of Health, published a report in 2008 that acknowledged continuing and expanding health disparities as avoidable and then recommended reducing healthcare disparities in the coming decades (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008; Koh et al., 2010). Health disparities serve as indicators of progression regarding

health equity. Health equity, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), emphasizes that all individuals should have the same chance to reach their highest potential in terms of health along with that no individual should be prevented from performing that inevitably, since there are a number of complicated economic, social, political, environmental, and cultural parameters, a lot of individuals do not have access to this excellent chance to reach their optimal health.

The majority of health disparities are linked to the aforementioned variables, also known as social determinants of health (SDOH), which are crucial for forecasting outcomes related to health. According to their definition, they are "conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age", especially "influenced by the allocation of resources, authority, and money at international, national, and regional levels (Braveman, 2014; Daniel et al., 2018; WHO/Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008).

Addressing health equity requires societal commitment in order to eliminate health obstacles while offering opportunities for all individuals to maintain their well-being with a special emphasis on those who have less favorable health conditions, experience more social health barriers, and are equipped with limited opportunities for boosting their health. Moreover, in accordance with fundamental ethical considerations that include autonomy and respect for persons, as well as the principles of human rights, such as participating in the community and decision-making which impact one's well-being, expanding health equity necessitates involving excluded or marginalized groups within both the preparation and execution of actions necessary for accomplishing more substantial health equity (Braveman et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2022; Koh et al., 2010; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; WHO/Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008).

The responsibility of nurses and other healthcare professionals along with healthcare systems in establishing and maintaining health equity has been progressively addressed. As a result, the cultural competence along with cultural safety for healthcare employees are increasingly major concerns at the level of the organization as well as the individual healthcare provider in order to establish an equitable healthcare system, with questions about how to define these concepts becoming crucial (Andermann et al., 2016;

Brascoupé & Waters, 2009; Browne et al., 2016; LaVeist & Pierre, 2014). Over the past 50 years, significant progress has been made in our comprehension of the extent and severity of health disparities, the social and health variables that contribute to them, and the significance of eliminating systemic discrimination as a means of attaining health equity in nursing and other medical fields. Nursing researchers and policymakers are becoming more aware of the need to address structural racial prejudice outward manifestations, such as restrictions regarding financial flexibility as well as having access to excellent education and healthcare. Researchers studying health systems should keep shifting their attention away from health inequities toward core causes as structural racism (Braveman et al., 2011).

### **Health Equity and Health Disparities from the Perspectives of Nursing Philosophy, Theories, and Ethical Principles**

Philosophy is an area of learning that uses rigorous inquiry to identify, assess, and comprehend numerous phenomena in the natural world. Considering multiple scientific literatures, a number of investigators declared that ontology, epistemology, and axiology are the three foundations or natures of philosophy. Furthermore, the concept of philosophy has a considerable impact on how nurses analyze phenomena that occur in the field. As the fundamental component of rights, demonstrating value, and the essence of excellent nursing practice, it is necessary for nursing practice along with nursing ethics. Science and philosophy are inseparable, as they both benefit from one another; science requires philosophy in order to link what it has discovered for human understanding, while philosophy can serve as a common language between fields. Philosophy is going to assist nurses better comprehend issues; therefore, it is going to offer nurses an alternative viewpoint on how they should handle their profession (Killam, 2013; Prosek & Gibson, 2021; Risjord, 2011).

Over the past two or three decades, nursing science's philosophies, ethics, and theories have all witnessed proceeding advancement. These developments have primarily occurred in the academic realm, which commonly separates nursing theory from nursing practices (Chinn & Kramer, 2013; Meleis, 2011). However, over the past 10 years, caring and healing connections have received greater prominence as the

foundation of professional nursing, along with theory-guided practice methodologies. Professionals are simultaneously searching for greater realistic practices that integrate a sense of meaning into their profession. The current nursing shortage, nursing distress towards institutional demands, knowledge of a lack of human caring in our personal and professional lives, as well as in institutions and society, have all contributed to a large portion of this altering consciousness (Watson, 2007). Nowadays, medical professionals, clients, and systems as well are experiencing a revolution in nursing that is reinvigorating the compassionate nature of nursing and healthcare through theory-guided philosophical practices (Rosa et al., 2019; Watson, 2007).

Nurses find themselves in an exceptional place for achieving social justice and equity, in addition to eliminating health disparities within the healthcare sector simply due to the degree of trust and connection that they share with clients. In a combination of our holistic training and dedication to nursing ethics, we are optimal social-justice activists. Nursing has continuously been regarded as among the most moral professions (Chen et al., 2016; Rosa et al., 2019). Thus, in order to achieve health equity and eliminate health disparities as nurses, we have to adhere to our fundamental nursing philosophy, which passionately advocates the human right to access all healthcare resources without discrimination, especially against those who have been influenced by social determinants of health. We can additionally achieve health equity by using the Kantian theory of morality.

According to the duty-based ethical theory, the existence of significant health disparities against certain individuals contradicts the basic respect that must be shown for all people; hence, we have a moral obligation to address health disparities. The interpretation of Kant that prohibits us from treating others as equal means to our aims is the one that has proven most pertinent in bioethics. The Kantian categorical imperative includes two essential interpretations. The universal moral principle generates its power from the belief that rational people are essentially respectable. Furthermore, according to Kantian principles, health disparities are considered a major violation of morality, since they break a fundamental duty of respect towards human dignity given to all human beings. We consequently have an ethical responsibility to prevent others from spreading this lack of respect among humans (Cavallar,

2020; Grace et al., 2022; Hwang, 2011).

Additionally, the utilitarian ethics, employing outcomes to determine whether a practice is acceptable or wrong with the optimization of the most beneficial outcome for the largest number of people, can be adopted to establish the assertion that health disparities are immoral. Furthermore, in the perspective of utilitarianism, the advantageous effects of the numerous may exceed the good of an individual whenever the whole of happiness substantially exceeds the sum of the single individual's unhappiness. Health disparities, on the other hand, represent a negative impact on an extremely diverse group among individuals that cannot be compensated for by a correspondingly substantial advantage. The reality is that particular minority populations are less healthy on average compared with the population as a whole. Health disparities seem to represent a considerable ongoing negative impact on community as a whole. As a result of the implications of health disparities, there are utilitarian grounds to deem them morally unacceptable (Mill, 2016; Powers & Faden, 2006).

Moreover, the claim that health disparities are a violation of morality can be supported through the implementation of a number of moral principles, such as the principles of beneficence, non-maleficence and distributive justice. The principle of beneficence is violated by health disparities, since neither individual at the losing side of the disparities nor any other people are benefiting from them. Instead, it might be argued that health disparities violate the principle of non-maleficence by causing major damage in the manner of deteriorating health, discomfort, and shorter life lengths. As a result, nurses advocate for and participate in achieving human-health equity based on nursing philosophies and nursing core moral principles that encourage the transformation of present health disparities (Bufacchi, 2020; Cawthorne & Robbins-van Wynsberghe, 2020; Mehmet, 2022).

Furthermore, in addition to the previously mentioned nursing philosophies and ethical perspectives that can be used as a foundation to transform and achieve health equity, and eliminate health disparities in our nursing profession, from our perspective and point of view, the critical social theory has a strong impact and emphasizes the transformation of current situation on health disparities across all healthcare systems around the world. The critical theory is a broad paradigm that

conveys nursing the appropriate direction for investigating phenomena that are challenging to address, including challenging circumstances, such as abuse, disparities, and health inequity among individuals in society, typically appearing to be indistinguishable, as the theory's foundation requires engaging in equitable and ethical actions to enhance the overall well-being and health of societies, which is complicated compared to the conventional paradigm. Furthermore, the critical-theory perspective pertains to the elimination of social disparities, as justice has been demonstrated to be essential and crucial. The emancipatory paradigm aims to affect social change by focusing on freedom and release, throughout the research process as well as in the transformation of the community. Besides, this paradigm addresses how power is shared in an equal environment. Empowerment, cooperation, and autonomy are all addressed in the emancipatory process, focusing on emancipation as an essential perspective which ultimately results in building awareness using an actively involved strategy, by employing active participants and critical analysis as research methodologies, allowing human phenomena to become apparent and become examined (Bowleg, 2017; Curtis et al., 2019; Snell-Rood et al., 2021; Todici et al., 2022). Thus, from the standpoint of emancipatory critical social theory, nurses play an important role in changing society to achieve health equity, considering that all humans should have the right to have access to healthcare resources, knowledge, and services without any obstacles or discriminations. Nurses serve as change agents in their society, and they are responsible for educating the population about their rights in health equity and boosting society awareness.

A person-centered care (PCC) paradigm is being implemented by healthcare systems and institutions around the world in an effort to increase the performance of the health systems (Riley & Jones, 2022). According to the Institute of Medicine, compassionate, empathetic, respectful, and responsive care is given to each patient's requirements, values, and expressed wishes. Care which implies that client values inform clinical judgments is inclusive (IOM, 2001: 48-50). It is important to keep into consideration that person-centered care is more comprehensive and includes factors, like setting, close friends, and family, preventative measures, promotion, and wishes (Santana et al., 2018). Broadly, PCC is a concept in which healthcare professionals are given the opportunity to

work with patients in order to design and provide individualized care that meets people's needs for excellent treatment while also improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the healthcare system as a whole. Nursing employs this approach to achieve health equity among patients by encouraging all patients to participate in medical decisions regarding their health. Moreover, Jean Watson's explanation of nursing and all ten carative features described in her nursing theory provide unique support for a person-centered care philosophy. Nursing, according to Watson, is "a human science of persons and human health-illness experiences mediated by professional, personal, scientific, esthetic, and ethical human transactions" (Doherty et al., 2020; Padrón & Pederson, 2022; Tomaselli et al., 2020; Watson, 2007: 54).

In *Culture Care Diversity and Universality: A Theory of Nursing* (Leininger, 1991), Madeleine Leininger contributes to our knowledge regarding the relationship between nursing care and diversity in culture and society. The consideration and incorporation of culture and context in our actions of care while connecting with individuals who thought and practiced different viewpoints represent the theory's foundation. It requires considering the expressed and underlying needs of every individual in order to design interventions which are respectful and consciously considerate the clients' preferences and wishes. Thus, it is an approach for nursing to achieve health equity by advocating for providing care for all individuals while taking cultural diversity into consideration; therefore, based on this theoretical perspective, it becomes essential to include material on cultural diversity and the right to health equity through undergraduate and higher-education curricula (Giddings, 2005; Leininger, 1991; Shen, 2015).

### **Implications for Nursing**

In the context of healthcare policy and guidelines, the nursing profession plays an essential and central role in promoting health equity and reducing health disparities. As a result, nurse managers and leaders in administrative positions can utilize this knowledge as a foundation to develop comprehensive guidelines and policies that support and assist nurses in their efforts to maintain health equity for individuals from diverse backgrounds. By acknowledging the significance of nursing professionals in achieving these goals, healthcare organizations can empower their nursing staff to actively contribute to eliminating disparities and ensuring equal access to

healthcare for all. Thus, through the implementation of international policies and guidelines, nurses can effectively address the unique needs and challenges faced by different populations, ultimately working towards a more inclusive and equitable healthcare system.

In the realm of nursing practice, nurses possess the advantageous position of being able to significantly contribute to addressing the root causes of health disparities by comprehending and acknowledging the diverse factors that impact an individual's overall well-being. Additionally, nurses significantly collaborate with interdisciplinary teams to effectively implement several strategies to achieve health equity. Furthermore, Jordanian nurses can expand their responsibilities by providing patients and their caregivers with educational materials concerning health equity. Furthermore, all individuals have the right to be informed about their entitlement to receive high-quality care without any form of discrimination. In conclusion, the pursuit of health equity and the elimination of health disparities have become crucial goals. Nurses, being at the forefront of patient care, have a significant role in achieving these objectives. Thus, by examining nursing philosophical, theoretical, and ethical perspectives, Jordanian nurses can better understand how nurses contribute to the advancement of health equity and the reduction of health disparities.

Within the scope of nursing education, it is imperative that both the undergraduate curriculum and continuous clinical education place a significant emphasis on the imperative of advancing health equity and eradicating health disparities. To effectively address this imperative, the educational resources and courses that are provided for nursing have to delve deeply into several approaches that can be effectively implemented to achieve these goals. Moreover, it is of utmost importance that these educational materials thoroughly examine and analyze various nursing philosophies, theories, and ethical principles that are firmly rooted in the notion that every single individual is entitled to receiving exceptional healthcare without any form of discrimination or disparity.

### **Conclusion**

Nursing philosophy encompasses the fundamental beliefs and values that guide the nursing profession. Therefore, nurses believe in the inherent worth and

dignity of every individual, which underpins their commitment to promoting health equity. In addition to recognizing and respecting the uniqueness of each patient, nurses strive to provide equitable care that meets the patients' diverse needs. Thus, this philosophy also emphasizes the importance of holistic care, which considers not only the physical health, but also the emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of individuals. By adopting a holistic approach, nurses can address the underlying determinants of health disparities and work towards eliminating them. Hence, nursing philosophical, theoretical, and ethical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for achieving health equity and eliminating health disparities.

By recognizing the inherent worth of every individual, understanding the social determinants of health, and upholding ethical principles, nurses can contribute significantly to promoting equity in healthcare. Through their advocacy, patient-centered care, and interventions, nurses are at the forefront of efforts to create a more equitable and just healthcare system. Nursing theory provides a framework for understanding and guiding nursing practice.

Various theories help nurses recognize the factors that contribute to health disparities. By understanding the complex interplay between socio-economic status, education, access to healthcare, and other determinants, nurses can develop interventions aimed at reducing health disparities. Additionally, nursing theories highlight the importance of cultural competence and patient-centered care. By recognizing and respecting diverse cultural beliefs and practices, nurses can tailor their care to meet the specific needs of different populations, ultimately promoting health equity.

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### **Conflict of Interests**

No conflict of interests is to be declared by the authors.

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