

Introduction to Theory in Nursing

PART

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What Is Nursing Theory?

Nursing theories are the creative products of nurses who seek (or sought) to thoughtfully describe the many aspects of nursing in ways that could be studied, evaluated, and used by other nurses. In other words, theory is an attempt to explain patterns and relationships found in nursing phenomena. Nurse theorists are people who are or have been nurses, have thought deeply about how one might describe the phenomenon of nursing, and then have tried in their own way, from their own perspective, to record their thoughts and observations based on professional and personal experiences. Each theory is as unique as the individual(s) who created it.

In many cases, the creators of nursing theories did not set out to “become” nurse theorists. For the most part, theories evolved, and continue to evolve, out of creative attempts to describe nursing phenomena in ways that made sense to the theorists and others. Published nursing theories stimulate formal debate, exploration, and research regarding the nature and process of nursing. Theories give nurses different ways of viewing reality, such as expanding awareness of concepts never before considered, organizing care activities, and providing opportunities for reflection and the formation of opinions. Nursing theories are formal tools for communication that enable experienced nurses to communicate specific perceptions about nursing in a structured way

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so that others have an opportunity to study, evaluate, participate in, and add to an ongoing dialogue meant to address questions such as:

- What do nurses do?
- What makes nursing unique from other healthcare-related professions?
- What is wholistic nursing care?
- What is meant by terms such as *wellness* and *illness*?
- Do certain nursing actions measurably improve client outcomes?
- What differentiates excellent nursing care from marginal nursing care?
- Is nursing a job, a vocation, a profession, or a combination of all three?
- Is the core of nursing “caring” or technical skill mastery?
- Is nursing meant to be an independent profession or an auxiliary component of the medical profession?
- Should nursing practice formally encompass the metaphysical? Spiritual?
- How should phenomena that cannot be concretely measured through the five senses be addressed in nursing?

These are only a few of a myriad of questions and concerns addressed by nursing theories. The focus of a particular theory depends on the concurrent historical/political/social/professional environment and the personal and professional experiences of the theorist. Because there are wide-ranging issues associated with nursing practice, theories may be created to address broad or very narrow aspects of the profession.

For the purposes of organization and ease of understanding, nursing theories can be placed into three loosely defined categories:

1. Definitions of nursing in general (philosophies)
2. Discussions of broad nursing practice areas (grand theories)
3. Assertions about specific nursing actions, processes, or concepts (middle-range theories)

Some nursing theories may fit into more than one category, depending on how they are interpreted and used by individuals. There is no firm rule regarding what category a specific theory fits into. In fact, there is much debate surrounding theory development and evaluation. The questions and ambiguity surrounding these ongoing debates may be disconcerting to those

new to the study of theory because there never seems to be a *correct* answer or viewpoint. The first assignment in any study of nursing theory should be to become comfortable with ambiguity. For example, there are ongoing debates over categorical determinations or differences in terms, such as *theory* versus *model* versus *theoretical framework*. There will probably never be a final resolution to these debates because the great variety of viewpoints among nursing scholars only continues professional dialogues that stimulate exploration and learning. Because ambiguity is quite often a feature of the study of nursing theory, productive learning approaches include listening, evaluating, reading, adopting another's position to assess personal fit, formulating an informed opinion, and realizing that firm answers do not always apply.

Informed opinion based on scholarly study is a valid approach in deciding what category a theory might fit into at any given time. A scholar, whether beginning or expert, is expected to have an opinion based on logical, rational thought that can be explained. Making informed judgments about theories may seem a daunting task for a beginner. Methods for making such determinations will be discussed in Chapter 4. More complete discussions and examples of theory categories are contained in Parts II, III, and IV. Be aware that this text is just one approach for “making sense” of nursing theories. Use the broad categories and definitions presented here or other classification systems with the awareness that there will be variations and debates within the literature regarding nursing theory. Continued debates, however, do not diminish the importance of nursing theory for the profession. As a matter of fact, nursing theory, and its role in nursing research, has done more to advance the scholarship of nursing over the last 40 years than any other nursing endeavor. Nursing theory has served as a framework for inquiry that has allowed the profession to create its own body of knowledge. For now, it may be helpful to remember that theories, though to some extent abstract and ambiguous, exist to help nurses explain and guide the very real practice world around them.

