Week 1: Historical Overview of Theory in Nursing

Historical Overview

It was not until the 1950s and 1960s, almost 100 years after Florence Nightingale's Notes on Nursing, that nursing leaders initiated an effort to define or explain why and how the profession of nursing is different from other healthcare professions. The major impetus of this push was to develop a theory that, in the words of Florence Nightingale, would describe what is and what is not nursing (Smith & Parker, 2015).

In Notes on Nursing (1859), Nightingale outlined the fundamental aspects of nursing practice. Nightingale felt that nurses would use their critical-thinking skills through their observations of the sick and their environments and develop knowledge about factors that promoted patient healing and outcomes of care. Nightingale's theoretical framework for nursing emphasized the importance of empirical knowledge based on nursing assessments and interventions. Nightingale believed that nursing knowledge was distinct from medical knowledge (Melnyk & Fineout-Overholt, 2011; McEwen & Wills, 2014).

Subsequent to Nightingale, a century passed before nursing scholars started further development of theoretical works to describe and expand the nursing profession, as well as to guide nursing practice (Parker & Smith, 2015).

**History of Nursing Theory Development**

Learn more about the history of nursing theory development.



[History of Nursing Theory Development (Links to an extern](https://lms.courselearn.net/lms/CourseExport/manual/interactives/CU/NR501/NR501_W1_History_Nursing_Theory/story_html5.html)

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| Term | Definition |
| **Silent Knowledge (1859/1950)** | This is the minimal attempt by nurses to develop theory; research was limited to epidemiological outcomes. |
| **Received Knowledge (1950s)** | This phase was marked by nurse scholars borrowing theories from other professional disciplines to expand upon nursing practice. As nurses received doctoral degrees, they learned from and incorporated scholarly work of educators, psychologists, physiologists, sociologists, and anthropologists to enhance the knowledge of nursing practice. Research focused on describing nursing knowledge as concepts from educational or sociologic research. |
| **Subjective Knowledge (1960s)** | Nurse scholars focused on developing theories about and for nursing. Nursing theories focused on the concept of the nurse rather than on patients and clinical situations. |
| **Procedural Knowledge (1970s)** | New and numerous approaches to theory development by nurse scholars. The focus of nursing research was placed on clinical practice nurses used to provide care for their patients, as well as attention to the appropriateness of research design and statistical procedures for data analysis. |
| **Constructed Knowledge (1980s)** | During this phase in the 1980s, nursing scholars began to concentrate on the need to develop nursing theories that would be practical to the profession and provide meaningful foundation for nursing practice. As a result, attention shifted from grand theories to middle-range and practice theories. Nursing theory was based on prior nursing research studies, literature, clinical experiences, intuition, and knowledge. Thus, there was focus on concepts grounded in practice and linked to research. This is the current stage of theory development in nursing. |

**Reflection**

Consider nursing in countries, other than the United States, with a focus on developing and under-developed countries where nursing has yet to achieve status as a profession. How can theory be used to transform nursing?