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The Philosophical Bases of Nursing Knowledge Development

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ABSTRACT

Scientific evidence can accumulate to support or rebut theoretical contention or provide the basis for suggesting modifications in a nursing theory only through repeated and rigorous research. Nursing has evolved from periods of being in a traditional observation to scientific patterns of doing nursing care. The early works paved the way to recognize the complicated and yet systematic process of human interactions and documented that the pluralistic understanding of science emphasizes the construction of scientific models and nursing endeavors that are appropriate for a more effective response to the need of health. Further, nurses have to identify his or her working philosophy for the effective and efficient delivery of care to clientele.

Keywords: Nursing, Development

INTRODUCTION

What is nursing? How this differs to philosophy? What is a nursing philosophy? Why do nurses need to define their philosophy as they practice the profession? What are the philosophical movements that guide the development of nursing knowledge? Philosophical bases of nursing are an essential foundation of doctoral scholarship in the development of nursing knowledge. Everyone has a philosophy - whether they take the time to think about it or not. We all have beliefs about what nursing is, what is not, a value that is important to us, and those beliefs influence the choices we make.

Nursing philosophy is defined to promote understanding and analysis of nursing phenomena and guide the scholarly development of the science of nursing and its practice through research. Once a nursing theory has identified that fits an area or phenomena of interests, several issues must be considered such as the completeness of the theory, any missing components or relationships, the theory's internal consistency, the theory's correspondence with available empirical findings, and whether it is operationally defined for testing.⁽¹⁾

Analyses of this type logically lead to the consideration of the next steps in the development of a theory. The goal of this research in theory development and testing is to continue to direct attention and energies to the critical analysis of existing incomplete theories in terms of their potential to further development.⁽²⁾ Scientific evidence can accumulate to support or rebut theoretical contention or provide the basis for suggesting modifications in a nursing theory only through repeated and rigorous research.⁽³⁾

ITS CORE SUBSTANCE

Theory development is not a mysterious, magical activity, but a scholarly movement is pursued systematically.⁽⁴⁾ This means that for a theory to be accepted and used in practice there has to be series of theory test and validation. The availability of more developed theories would provide a clearer understanding of nursing practice. Rigorous development of nursing theories, then, is a high priority for the development of the nursing profession.

The profession provides a generic background about the development of nursing knowledge when Florence Nightingale-being the mother of modern nursing envisioned nurses as a body of educated women at a time when women were neither educated nor employed in public service. Following her years of service organizing and caring for the wounded during Crimean war, her vision and her establishment of a school of nursing at St. Thomas' hospital in London marked the birth of modern nursing which recognizes the process of interpersonal interaction between the nurse and the client that functions with other human processes to make health possible. Throughout the century, nurses worked toward the development of the profession in what has been described as successive historical eras.⁽⁵⁾

The curriculum era addresses the question of why nurses should study in order to learn how to nurse. In this era the emphasis was on addressing on what nursing students should take with the goal of arriving a standardized curriculum which marked the start of nursing knowledge development. However, it was also in this era that the idea of moving nursing education from hospital-based diploma programs into colleges and universities emerged. Even so, it was the middle of the century before this goal began to be acted upon in many states.⁽⁶⁾ As more and more nurses sought degrees in higher education, this research era, as it is deemed began to emerge. This era came about as more and more nurse's embraced higher education

and arrived at a common understanding of the scientific age: that research was the path to new nursing knowledge and its continuous development. Graduate programs in nursing emerged to meet the public need for nurses with specialized nursing education. With an increased understanding of research and knowledge development, it soon became obvious that research without theory produced isolated information, and it was research and theory together that produces nursing science. In the early years of theory era, doctoral education in nursing flourished and the emphasis was on theory development more than use of theory in nursing practice. However, within the contemporary phase of the theory era, an emphasis on the use of theory at the middle range level has emerged for theory-based nursing practice, as well as continued theory development.⁽⁷⁾

Nightingale's vision of nursing has been practiced for more than a century, and theory development in nursing has evolved rapidly over the past decades, leading to the recognition of nursing as an academic discipline with a substantive body of knowledge. She further expressed with firm conviction that nursing knowledge was distinct from medical knowledge. She described a nurse's proper function as putting the patient in the best condition for nature (God) to act upon him or her. She put forth the idea that care of the sick is based on knowledge of persons and their surroundings, which was a different knowledge base than that physicians used for their practice. Despite this early edict from Nightingale in the 1850's, members of the nursing profession began serious discussion about the need to develop, articulate and test nursing theory. Until the emergence of nursing practice was based primarily on principles and traditions passed on through an apprenticeship model of education and hospital-kept procedure manuals or handbooks that came from years of experience and use.

Although some nursing leaders aspired for nursing to develop as a profession and an academic discipline, nursing practice continued to reflect a vocational heritage more than a professional vision. The transition from nursing as a vocation to nursing profession included successive periods of history as nurses searched for a body of substantive knowledge on which nursing practice would be based. The history had recorded nursing practice as based on nursing science. According to Meleis, this progress in nursing theory is a most significant aspect of scholarly evolution and a cornerstone of the nursing discipline.⁽⁸⁾

As the nurse entered academia in larger numbers during the half of the century, the goal to develop knowledge as basis for nursing practice began to be realized. University offered baccalaureate programs proliferated, master's programs were developed and standardization of curricula increased through accreditation process. Nursing leaders presented different perspectives for the development of nursing science.

In the period of 1980s, this was the major developments in nursing theory characterized as a transition from the paradigm period.⁽⁹⁾ The prevailing paradigms provided various perspectives for nursing practice, education, research and its perspectives for human becoming and further for theory development. Fawcett's proposal that global nursing concepts represented a nursing metaparadigm introduced an organizing structure for existing nursing frameworks in nursing literature. Those paradigms united the nursing theoretical works into systematic view for comprehension of knowledge development process by embedding theorists' works in a larger context and facilitating an understanding of the growth of nursing as a science within the paradigm perspectives.⁽¹⁰⁾

There are four general kinds of theoretical works. The first type is nursing philosophy that sets forth the meaning of nursing phenomena through analysis, reasoning and logical argument or presentation. Early works predate the nursing theory era have contributed to knowledge and development by providing direction or forming a basis for subsequent developments.

The second type, the nursing conceptual models comprises the nursing works of grand theorists.⁽⁷⁾ A conceptual model provides a distinct frame of reference for their adherent that tells them how to observe and interpret the phenomenon of interest to the discipline. The nursing models of this grand theorist are comprehensive and include their perspectives on each of the metaparadigm concepts: person, environment, health and nursing.⁽⁹⁾ Most nursing conceptual models have grand theories that the theorists have derived from their own models. Nursing models have explicit or implicit grand theories within them. An excellent example of a grand theory may be observed in Roy's work, where a grand theory of the person as an adaptive system is derived from her Adaptation model.

The third type, nursing theory, may have been derived from works in other disciplines and related to nursing from earlier nursing philosophies and theories.⁽¹¹⁾ Theories may be specific to a particular aspect of nursing practice.

The fourth type, middle range theory has narrower focus yet and is much more concrete than grand theory or nursing theory in its level of abstraction.⁽⁷⁾ Therefore middle range theories are more precise and focus on answering specific nursing practice questions. They specify such factors as the group of the patient, the family situation, the health situation and location of the patient, and most importantly the action of the nurse.⁽¹¹⁾ Middle range theories address the specifics of nursing situations within the perspective of the model or theory from which they are derived.

In any given era and in any given discipline, science is structured by an accepted set of presuppositions that define the phenomena for study and define the appropriate methods for data collection and interpretation.⁽¹²⁾ These presuppositions set the boundaries for the scientific enterprise in a particular field. In Brown's view of the transactions between theory and empirical observation:

"Theory determines what observations are worth making and how they are to be understood, and observation provides challenges to accepted theoretical structures. The continuing attempt to produce a coherently organized body of theory and observation is the driving for research, and the prolonged failure of specific projects leads to scientific revolutions."

The presentation and acceptance of a revolutionary theory may alter the existing presuppositions and theories, thereby creating a different set of boundaries and procedures. The result is a new set of problems or a new way to interpret observations; that is a new picture of the world.⁽¹²⁾ In this view of science, the emphasis must be placed on ongoing research rather than the established findings.

In 1977, after Nursing Research had been existence for 25 years, studies were comprehensively reviewed and the strengths and weaknesses of the research noted. Batey called attention the importance of nursing conceptualizations to the research process and the role of conceptual framework in the design of research for the production of science.⁽¹³⁾ At that time, nursing theoretical works began to be published.⁽¹⁴⁾

To formalize the science of nursing, basic queries must be considered such as its content being a science, knowledge and truth. Although philosophy has been documented as an activity for 300 years.⁽¹⁵⁾, formal science is a relatively new human pursuit only recently become the object of investigation. The two competing theories of science, rationalism and empiricism have evolved in the era of modern science with several variations. Gale labeled these theories as centrally concerned with the power of reason and the power of sensory experience. Gale noted similarity in the divergent views of science in the time of classical Greeks.⁽¹⁶⁾

In the Rationalist's epistemology emphasizes the importance of reasoning as the appropriate method of advancing knowledge in science. The scientist in this tradition approaches the task of scientific inquiry by developing systematic explanation (theory) of a given phenomenon.⁽¹⁶⁾ This conceptual system is analyzed by addressing the logical structure of the theory and the logical reasoning involved in its development. Theoretical assertions derived by deductive reasoning are then subjected to experimental testing to corroborate the theory. If the findings fail to correspond with the theoretical assertions, additional research is conducted or modifications are made in the theory and further tests devised; or otherwise, the theory is discarded in favor of an alternative explanation.⁽¹⁷⁾ The science should evolve more rapidly through the process of conjectures and refutations by devising research in an attempt to refute new ideas.

Rationalism holds, in contrast to empiricism, that is no reason, not experience that is most important for our acquisition of knowledge. Rationalism's way of thinking considered three distinct types of knowledge in support to this.

First, the rationalist argues that we possess at least some innate knowledge. We are not born, as the empiricist John Locke thought with minds like blank slates onto which experience writes items of knowledge. Rather even before we experience the world there are some things that we know. We at least possess some basic instincts; arguably, we also possess some innate concepts, such as faculty of language.

Second, the rationalist argues that there are some truths that, though not known innately, can be worked out independently through experiencing the world. These are truths of logic or mathematics, or ethical truths. We can know the law of the excluded middle, answers to sums, and the difference between right and wrong, without having to base that knowledge in experience.

Third, the rationalist also claimed that there are some truths, though grounded in part in experience, cannot be derived from experience alone. Aesthetic truths, and truths about causation, for instance, seem to many to be of this kind. Two people may observe the same object, yet reach contradictory views as to its beauty or ugliness. This shows that aesthetic qualities are not presented to us by our senses, but rather are overlaid onto experience by reason. Similarly, we do not observe causation; we merely see one event followed by another. It is the mind, not the world that provides us with the idea that the former event causes the latter.

Meanwhile, the empiricist's view is based on the central idea that scientific knowledge can be derived only from sensory experience. Francis Bacon received credit for popularizing the basis for the empiricist approach to inquiry. Bacon believed that the scientific truth was discovered through generalizing observed facts in the natural world. This approach, called the inductive method, is based on the idea that the collection of facts precedes attempts to formulate generalizations, or as Reynolds (1971) called it, the research-then-theory strategy.⁽¹⁸⁾

The strict empiricist view is reflected in the work of the behaviorists Watson and Skinner. Skinner asserted that advances in the science of psychology could be expected if scientists would focus on the collection of empirical data. He cautioned against drawing premature inferences and proposed a moratorium on theory building until further facts were collected. His approach to theory construction was clearly inductive. His view of science and the popularity of behaviorism have been credited with influencing psychology's shift in emphasis from the building of theories to the gathering of facts between the 1950s and 1970s.⁽¹⁹⁾ The difficulty of inductive mode of inquiry is that the world presents an infinite number of possible observations, and therefore, the scientists must bring ideas to her experiences to decide what to observe and what to exclude.

Empiricism states that knowledge comes only or primarily from the sensory experience. One of the several views of epistemology, the study of human knowledge, along with rationalism and skepticism, empiricism emphasizes the role of experience and evidence, especially sensory experiences in the formation of ideas, over the notion of innate ideas or traditions; empiricists may argue, however the traditions or customs arise due to relations of previous sense experiences.

The new logic of empiricism explains the relations between propositions and how the different relationships between propositions determined the truth or falsity of compound statements. It provided laws by which true atomic statements could be put together to arrive at true compound statements. This logic showed how one could build up true complex statements and generalizations if one could start with true propositions. It made clear the methods by which one could preserve truth in formulating general laws from particular observing statements. Thus it promised to bridge the gap between observations and theory by providing rules that would guarantee true laws if started with true propositions.

The logical empiricists offered a more lenient view of logical positivism and argued that theoretical propositions must be tested through observation and experimentation. This perspective is rooted in the idea that empirical facts exists independently of theories and offer the only basis for objectivity in science. In this view, objective truth exists independently of the researcher,

and the task of science is to discover it. The empiricist view shares similarities with Aristotle's view of biological science and Bacon's inductive method as the true method of scientific inquiry.⁽¹⁶⁾

Empiricist argues that for science to maintain objectivity, data collection and analysis must be independent of theory.⁽²⁰⁾ The assertion is based on the position that objective truth exists in the world, just waiting to be discovered. The new epistemology challenged the empiricist view of perception by acknowledging that theories play a significant role in determining what the scientist will observe and how it will be interpreted. The empiricist model was, thus, foundationalist. If one started with a firm foundation of atomic propositions directly verified in observation, one could reach true laws by combing these atomic propositions according to the rules of logic which preserved truth. The edifice of scientific knowledge was to be built on the firm foundations of observation according to the proven blueprints provided by logic.

CONCLUSION

Nursing has evolved from periods of being in a traditional observation to scientific patterns of doing nursing care. The early works paved the way to recognize the complicated and yet systematic process of human interactions and documented that the pluralistic understanding of science emphasizes the construction of scientific models and nursing endeavors that are appropriate for a more effective response to the need of health. Further, nurses have to identify his or her working philosophy for the effective and efficient delivery of care to clienteles.

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