



## Review

# Philosophical and theoretical content of the nursing discipline in academic education: A critical interpretive synthesis



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Nursing as clinical practice, management and research are based on nursing philosophy and theory. Thus, the philosophical and theoretical content is required to be incorporated in academic education in order to enable nurses' skills for reflection, analysis, and thinking about the profession.

**Objective:** The aim of this review was to describe what is known of the philosophical and theoretical content of the nursing discipline within academic education.

**Design:** A critical interpretive synthesis (CIS).

**Methods:** Electronic searches were performed across four databases, CINAHL, Scopus, Medline, and Web of Science, for papers published in English from 1980 to 2016. The selection of original articles was based on stages, and inclusion and exclusion criteria were used. Quality of the selected papers were evaluated by method sensitive appraisal criteria. The five phases of CIS were used to combine the selected data.

**Results:** The searches resulted 9148 titles, whereas 13 were selected. Nurses need philosophical and theoretical education in order to be aware of human health and explain the complexity of the human experience of illness. The philosophy of science, the philosophy of care, and theory development were highlighted as the key contents in nursing academic education as these subjects are central to the discipline that ensures that nurses acquire advanced skills. A model was developed that linked disciplinary issues the progression nursing science through the influence of advanced skills.

**Conclusions:** Based on the findings in this study the philosophical and theoretical content of nursing discipline creates a basis for the academic education and enables a professional and exclusive vision for nurses. It provides an overall understanding of people's lives and support nurses to achieve deeper awareness of the meaning of illness and health in a person lifespan what is needed on the evidence-based decision making.

## 1. Introduction

In the course of their clinical practice, nurses need to know *how* to act, but theoretical knowledge can provide arguments about *why* they should act (Rolfe, 2013). Questions that start with *why* can be used to create nursing targets and link specific acts to both human beings and experiences (Newman, 2003; Northrup et al., 2004). We need to combine knowledge to raise awareness of particular issues and inform good-quality clinical decision-making (Christensen, 2011). As an applied science, the nursing discipline reflects the practical nature of nursing and consists of a mixture of pragmatic and theoretical knowledge (Alligood, 2011; Newman, 2002). The philosophical and theoretical content of nursing education (at both the Masters and the Doctoral level) creates a basis for the nursing discipline, which guides the

development of later expertise in a clinical practitioner, someone who teaches nursing or a nurse researcher (Hicks and Butkus, 2011). Thus, focusing on nursing concepts, theories, and models supports nursing experts to practice, develop, and study advanced nursing practices (Doane and Varcoe, 2008; Donohue-Porter et al., 2011). In addition, the methodological content of education aims to guarantee that individuals have the capacity and the aptitude to use, assess, and produce scientific knowledge (Christensen, 2011).

## 2. Background

The philosophical and theoretical content of academic education refers to the underlying knowledge of the concepts and theories of nursing science (Clarke, 2011). The philosophical content consists of

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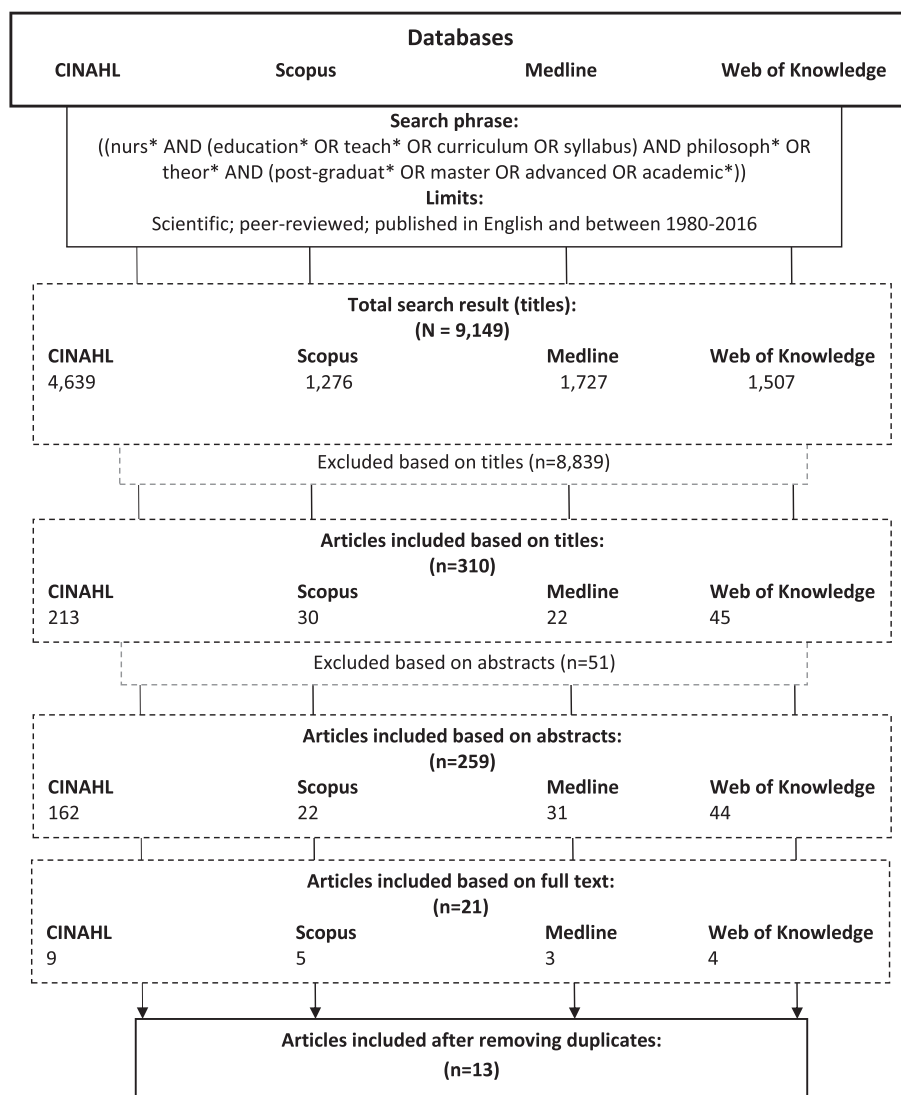


Fig. 1. Flow-chart of Critical Interpretative Synthesis process.

verbally expressed pragmatic or logical ideas and it explains the primary interest of the discipline, whereas the theory is concerned with the structure of clearly defined concepts (Grace and Perry, 2013; Nyatanga, 2005). In the nursing discipline, the empirical environment in clinical practice is multidimensional and complex; therefore, it requires clarified concepts, broad theories, and continuous theory development (Burney, 1992; Gallagher, 2007; Ingram, 1991; Meleis and Price, 1988; Miller, 2008). Theory development is linked to knowledge development and it provides a basis for further reflections, investigations, refinements, and a source of new knowledge (Algase, 2007; Cody, 2011). The development of theories is a part of the processes of reflection, analysis, formulation of questions, thinking and relating concepts, translating them into written or verbal mode, and using them to change reality (Butts and Lundy, 2003).

The theoretical and philosophical content of academic education is important for clinical practice because exploring this subject provides an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of reality and make a substantial contribution to the profession (Clarke and Holt, 2001; Smith and Mc Carthy, 2010). In nursing and healthcare, the development of critical analysis and the aptitudes to read, evaluate, and understand phenomena are crucial abilities of nursing academics. These abilities can also support nursing leaders to apply their knowledge to develop the necessary care improvements. Thus, it is useful to find new strategies so that nurses can practice their advanced skills (Donohue-Porter et al., 2011; Schober and Affara, 2006).

Despite a general agreement among nursing scholars about the importance of philosophical and theoretical knowledge in the nursing discipline, their roles have been largely restricted to the academic curricula of nursing (Donohue-Porter et al., 2011; Karnick, 2013). In fact, academic nursing curricula have been found to comprise other disciplines such as biological and related sciences, social and behavioural sciences, and medical or surgical content, with a significant lack of philosophical and theoretical discourse about the nursing discipline (Mc Namara et al., 2012; Northrup et al., 2004). Although it has received less attention, the distinctive philosophical and theoretical content of the nursing discipline at the academic level, is an essential component of its development (Baumann, 2010; Chinn, 2007; Dyess et al., 2010; Miller, 2008).

The aim of this review was to describe what is known of the philosophical and theoretical content of the nursing discipline which is included in academic education based on previous studies. The produced knowledge can be used in education to develop teaching on philosophical and theoretical content as a part of nurses advanced skills. Two review questions were formulated based on preliminary literature searches on the subject; these are:

1. What are the reasons behind the inclusion of the philosophical and theoretical content of the nursing discipline that has been included in academic education?
2. What kind of philosophical and theoretical content has been

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