A theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice as a complex system

Lauralie Richard, Ph.D.
Research Fellow
General Practice and Rural Health
Dunedin School of Medicine
University of Otago

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Disclosures and learning objectives

- **Co-author and collaborator**
  Sylvie Gendron, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Faculty of Nursing, Université de Montréal, Canada

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**Learning objectives for this presentation**

- Familiarise participants with the concept of nursing practice from a disciplinary perspective;
- Appreciate the value of a complexity lens to capture dynamic interconnections between nursing practice components and processes;
- Identify emerging issues in contemporary conceptualisations of nursing practice.
The concept of nursing practice is fundamental to the discipline and science of nursing.

Empirical research on nursing practice is critical to support evidence-based practice, but it is not sufficient.

It is essential to conceptualise nursing practice to situate findings derived from empirical research within the disciplinary field of nursing knowledge.

We present conceptual work combined with an empirical study of nursing practice with vulnerable populations to inform theory of nursing practice.
Disciplinary nursing knowledge

Nursing practice as focus of study

- EMPIRICAL research

THEORETICAL contribution

- Nursing practice as conceptual construct
Objective

To present a theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice as a complex system.

Particular focus on:
- Methodological process for the development of a model;
- Value of a complexity lens to conceptualise nursing practice;
- Issues to consider in contemporary conceptualisations of nursing practice.
REVIEW OF NURSING THEORIES
Analysis of nursing theorists’ conceptualisations of nursing practice

EMPIRICAL STUDY OF NURSING PRACTICE
Qualitative exploratory study of a nursing practice with vulnerable populations

THEORY OF NURSING PRACTICE
Development of a theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice as a complex system

METHODS
Complex systems lens
(a general systems theory)
Review of nursing theories

- Analysis of nursing theorists’ conceptualisations of nursing practice (Richard, Gendron and Cara, 2012)

- Literature search
  - CINAHL, Medline, Pubmed
  - 1960-2011
  - Keywords: nursing practice, nursing theory, nursing discipline, praxis, caring.
  - Inclusion criteria: theoretical and conceptual articles presenting a clear definition of nursing practice, a conceptualisation of nursing practice or key components of nursing practice.
  - 125 articles examined; data extracted for thematic analysis.
Results from the review

1. **Nursing care** as one of several components of nursing practice;
2. A network of actors and diverse ways of knowing and knowledge structure nursing practice;
3. Values, goals and intentions drive nursing practice;
4. The **environment** is constitutive of nursing practice organisation, activity and transformation;
5. The **transformation** of nursing practice is an interconnection of reflexive processes.
Conceptual framework guiding empirical study

- Reflexive processes
  - Transformation

- Nurse-patient-network of actors
  - Knowing/Diversity of knowledge
  - Professional identity

- Environment as constitutive of nursing practice

- Health
  - Humanistic values
  - Moral ideal

- Nursing care as core activity of nursing practice

Richard, Gendron & Cara (2012)
Empirical study of nursing practice with vulnerable populations
### Study design

A qualitative exploratory study of a nursing practice with vulnerable populations was carried out in three primary healthcare organisations in the province of Quebec, Canada.

### Research aim and questions

**Aim:** to develop a model of nursing practice with vulnerable populations

**Questions:**
- What activities or processes do nurses use in their interface nursing practice?
- With whom do nurses interact/intervene in their interface nursing practice?
- What projects, intentions and ideals are nurses inspired by in their interface nursing practice?
- In what context does interface nursing practice develop?
- How did interface nursing practice evolve over time?

### Methods

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<tr>
<th><strong>15 semi-structured interviews with primary care nurses (90 min.)</strong></th>
<th><strong>A combination of methods and sources of data to investigate nursing practice from different angles.</strong></th>
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<td>• Interview topics: nursing interventions or activities; actors with whom nurses intervene/interact; context of the interface nursing practice; constraints and success strategies of interface nursing practice.</td>
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<td>• Interview syntheses were sent to participants for feedback and validation.</td>
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**Self-administered sociodemographic questionnaire**

**Aim:** to produce professional and training portrayals of nurses who participated in semi-structured interviews

**1 year of participant observation (50 hours)**

**Aim:** to produce in-depth descriptions of interface nursing practice activities and contexts
- Observation of the interface practice of 2 nurses
- Observation during team meetings
- Informal interviews with administrators, interprofessional teams and community actors

**Document analysis**

**Aim:** to describe historical, organizational and political trends and contexts relating to the development of interface nursing practice

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis initiated during data collection;
Systemic model developed iteratively throughout the interpretive process of qualitative analysis using Le Moigne’s systemic lens.
Results from empirical study

- Qualitative analyses revealed 4 themes:
  1. nursing as strategic action;
  2. relational processes as core to nursing practice within a broad social network;
  3. autonomy as a social obligation for vulnerable populations;
  4. reconfiguration of professional identity through contradictory processes.
Theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice

- Time intensive reflective writing and schematisation at the intersection of empirical findings and social theory;

- Key questions
  - How do our empirical results relate to the nursing metaparadigm and our initial conceptualisation of nursing practice?
  - What significant concepts or interconnections between conceptual dimensions of nursing practice emerge?
  - How could we meaningfully represent nursing practice as an articulation of our core concepts?
Theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice

- Nursing practice as a complex system emphasising 4 core processes:
  1. Nursing practice is reflexive – it changes and generates change;
  2. Nursing practice is strategic – driven by nurses’ vision, goals and interests;
  3. Nursing practice is informed by humanistic values, social norms and a diversity of disciplinary (social-health) knowledge;
  4. Nursing practice is structured by a social environment combining a network of actors, resources, knowledge and values in interaction.
Theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice

Derived from Richard (2013)
Conclusions

- Contemporary conceptualisations of nursing practice should include:
  - nurses as strategic actors;
  - environment as constitutive of nursing practice;
  - reflexive processes as transformational praxis;
  - social theory to foster critical thinking.

- The value of complex systems thinking:
  - Critical reflection on nursing practice to bridge the theory – practice gap;
  - Dialogical thinking with other disciplines to address challenges in health and transformation of professional practice.
Conclusions

- Future work should further examine and critically reflect on:
  - the concept of health within a social environment;
  - the concept of person within a social network and social space;
  - the intersection of humanistic values of nursing practice with strategic action and (powerful) social norms.

- Theory of nursing practice should rely on rigorous empirical research and collaborative processes with nurses, as well as a diversity of sources of knowledge from various disciplines to capture the complexity of nursing practice in a world of perpetual change.
Thank you

Questions and comments
lauralierichard@gmail.com
@lauralierichard