

# Nursing Theories and Models as theoretical references for Brazilian theses and dissertations: a bibliometric study

*Teorias e Modelos de Enfermagem como referenciais teóricos de teses e dissertações brasileiras: estudo bibliométrico*  
*Teorías y Modelos de Enfermería como referenciales teóricos de tesis y disertaciones brasileñas: estudio bibliométrico*

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** to map the use of Nursing models and theories utilized as theoretical references in graduate academic Nursing research in Brazil. **Methods:** bibliometrics, performed in the Theses and Dissertations database of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel, in November, 2020. Data analysis was performed using simple descriptive statistics and lexical analysis, performed using the software: IRAMUTEQ. **Results:** the 50 selected studies were from the field of Nursing, 15 (30%) of which were theses and 35 (70%) were dissertations. 13 Nursing theories and models were identified, used as theoretical references, highlighting Roy's Adaptation Model in 10 (20%) of the researches. **Final Considerations:** the study found a great diversity in the use of nursing theories and models as a theoretical framework, which allowed us to identify the areas most researched by nurses and confirmed their application in different specialties and health contexts.

**Descriptors:** Nursing Theory; Models, Nursing; Nursing Research; Nursing Methodology Research; Bibliometrics.

## RESUMO

**Objetivos:** mapear o uso de modelos e teorias de Enfermagem utilizados como referenciais teóricos em pesquisas de pós-graduação *Stricto Sensu* em Enfermagem no Brasil. **Métodos:** bibliometria, realizada no banco de Teses e Dissertações da Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior, em novembro de 2020. A análise dos dados ocorreu por estatística descritiva simples e análise lexical, realizada com o uso do *software* IRAMUTEQ. **Resultados:** os 50 estudos selecionados foram da área de Enfermagem, sendo 15 (30%) teses e 35 (70%) dissertações. Identificaram-se 13 teorias e modelos de Enfermagem utilizadas como referenciais teóricos, destacando o Modelo de Adaptação de Roy em 10 (20%) pesquisas. **Considerações Finais:** o estudo constatou uma grande diversidade no uso de teorias e modelos de enfermagem como referencial teórico, o que possibilitou a identificação das áreas mais pesquisadas pelos enfermeiros e confirmou a sua aplicação em diferentes especialidades e contextos de saúde.

**Descritores:** Teoria de Enfermagem; Modelos de Enfermagem; Pesquisa em Enfermagem; Pesquisa Metodológica em Enfermagem; Bibliometria.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivos:** mapear el uso de modelos y teorías de enfermería utilizados como referenciales teóricos en investigaciones de posgrado *stricto sensu* de enfermería en Brasil. **Métodos:** bibliometría realizada en Banco de Tesis y Disertaciones de la Coordinación de Perfeccionamiento de Personal de Nivel Superior, en noviembre de 2020. Datos analizados por estadística descriptiva simple y análisis lexical, habiéndose utilizado el *software* IRAMUTEQ. **Resultados:** los 50 estudios seleccionados fueron del área de enfermería, consistiendo en 15 (30%) tesis y 35 (70%) disertaciones. Se identificaron 13 teorías y modelos de enfermería utilizados como referenciales teóricos, destacándose el Modelo de Adaptación de Roy en 10 (20%) de las investigaciones. **Consideraciones Finales:** el estudio constató una gran diversidad en el uso de teorías y modelos de enfermería como referenciales teóricos, permitiendo ello identificar las áreas más investigadas por los enfermeros y confirmando la aplicación de tales teorías y modelos en diferentes especialidades y contextos de salud.

**Descriptorios:** Teoría de Enfermería; Modelos de Enfermería; Investigación en Enfermería; Investigación Metodológica en Enfermería; Bibliometría.

## INTRODUCTION

Nursing has evolved from a mere occupation to a profession based on the development of a body of scientific and specific knowledge, developed by scholars in the field, which has allowed it to provide structured and legitimate care<sup>(1)</sup>.

Among the generation of this theoretical knowledge are the conceptual models and theories of Nursing, which are conceived as “[...] fundamental references to the disciplinary matrix of the profession [...]”, since they are very significant for teaching, the research and care, as they aim to consolidate Nursing as a science and art in the health area, by explaining, through their concepts, the worldview and the actions of professionals<sup>(2)</sup>.

Conceptual models are defined as a set of ideas or concepts (abstract elements) that are interrelated and that symbolically represent a phenomenon describing the relationships between the concepts that compose them<sup>(3)</sup>. They originate from theories or professional practice and are instrumentalized through the Nursing Process<sup>(4)</sup>.

Nursing theories are also a set of interrelated concepts, however they bring indications, propositions and definitions based on a philosophy, on scientific data and can test and deduce hypotheses<sup>(3)</sup>. They aim to describe phenomena, explain their relationships, predict consequences and prescribe care<sup>(5)</sup>. Its use is essential to meet the political, epistemological and social commitments of Nursing, relating to good practices in the construction and application of knowledge in the area within the health system, as well as to conform the metaparadigm composed of the concepts: person, health, environment and Nursing<sup>(6)</sup>.

Discussions about the difference between conceptual models and theories, as well as the production of Nursing theories date from the 1970s. One publication reported that some authors, such as Fawcett, report that conceptual models are more global and abstract, different from Nursing theories which are more concrete and specific<sup>(7)</sup>.

It is observed in the literature a dissonance in the use of these two terms, the attribution of different meanings<sup>(4)</sup> and often using them as synonyms. There are different positions among the authors, for many authors the difference between a conceptual model and Nursing theory is just semantic<sup>(8)</sup>.

Despite the scientific advance that theories have brought to the art of care, the adoption of strategies that legitimize their use to support care still deserves attention, which requires knowledge, research and discussions among professionals<sup>(9)</sup>. Therefore, nurses who recognize the conceptual meanings of theories since their formation, contribute to making sense of care practice. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the curricular and training structure of this professional. The perceptions of undergraduates are distant from how theories are applicable and how they can contribute to the construction of knowledge in the profession<sup>(10)</sup>.

However, they still have little academic prominence in undergraduate and postgraduate courses<sup>(11)</sup>. Many nurses choose to use theories and structures from other disciplines in the development of their scientific research<sup>(3)</sup>.

Advancing with studies on theories is essential for the professional development, as its use in practice allows the promotion of knowledge that supports the actions of nurses<sup>(12)</sup>.

Conducting research for the elaboration, validation and implementation of theories is of paramount importance for the advancement of knowledge produced by Nursing itself. Researchers and professionals, who appropriate theoretical frameworks to support their practice, contribute to transforming it and to giving continuity to theoretical and methodological concepts<sup>(13)</sup>.

Given the importance of theories and models for scientific production, it is questioned how they are used by researchers in the elaboration of academic studies, as the knowledge produced by Nursing should support their research. Thus, this study proposes a look at the use of Nursing theories and models as theoretical references, since the literature lacks an in-depth analysis that considers dissertations in addition to theses<sup>(14)</sup>, as well as exploring other methods and aspects, which can provide reflections on the production and advancement of knowledge in Brazilian Nursing science.

Based on that, the following question emerged: “Which Nursing theories and models are used as theoretical references in Brazilian theses and dissertations?”

## OBJECTIVES

To map the use of Nursing Theories and Models utilized as theoretical references in academic Graduate Nursing research in Brazil.

## METHODS

### Ethical aspects

Considering that this is a research centered on documental sources in the public domain, ethical assessment was waived according to Resolution No. 510/2016 of the National Health Council<sup>(15)</sup>.

### Study type

This is a bibliometric study, about the scientific production of theses and dissertations that used Nursing theories and models as a theoretical framework, in the period from 2013 to 2019 as a temporal delimitation, the initial milestone was established considering the beginning of the availability of theses and dissertations in the Theses and Dissertations database of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES\*) and the final milestone, the last full year of publications in that database at the time of data collection.

Bibliometrics is a research method that aims to synthesize academic work, know and highlight its characteristics, propose views and reflections on the area studied and assess, through metrics and indicators, the scientific production and dissemination<sup>(16)</sup>.

### Data source

Prior to the search, a research protocol was drawn up by the authors based on another study<sup>(17)</sup> containing: theme; objective;

\* CAPES is a well-known acronym in Brazil for this educational department from the government. They stand for the following words in Portuguese: “Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior”.

research question; controlled and uncontrolled descriptors; search strategies; applied filter; results of previous search and study selection criteria.

For the selection of studies, we have carried out a survey in the Theses and Dissertations database of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), in November 2020, through the terms identified in Bireme's Descriptors in Health Sciences (DeCS), defined in order to answer the research question and encompass the maximum number of studies within the theme: "Nursing Theory"; "Nursing Models"; "Nursing"; "Methodology"; "Nursing Research"; "Methodological Research in Nursing".

The following inclusion criteria were established: theses and dissertations that addressed a theory or nursing model as a theoretical framework, having the terms "Nursing theories" or "Nursing Models" in the title, abstract or descriptors. As exclusion criteria: not having an abstract available, being prior to the Sucupira Platform, not making the Nursing theory or model used known, and having used a theory that has not yet been critically analyzed and validated.

### Data collection and organization

Searches were performed in the "search" field of the CAPES theses and dissertations library, following the strategies: "Nursing Theories" (50), "Nursing Models" (20), "Methodological Research in Nursing" AND "Models of Nursing" (zero), "Methodological Research in Nursing" AND "Nursing Theories" (1), "Nursing Theory" AND Nursing Model AND Nursing (48). The collection and validation were carried out in pairs by the authors.

The researchers developed a collection instrument to extract data from the studies containing: Higher Education Institution (HEI), State, year of publication, modality (Masters or Doctorate), year of defense, abstract, theory or nursing model used as theoretical framework, methodological design, research focus, area of knowledge established by the authors as: Women's Health, Adult/Elderly Health, Child/Adolescent Health, Mental Health and Nursing Management.

### Data analysis

The collected data were registered and organized in a Microsoft Excel® spreadsheet. Data analysis took place in two ways: in the first, categorical qualitative data were descriptively analyzed with absolute and relative frequencies. In the second, the lexical analysis was performed using the software: *Interface de R pour les Analyse Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires* (IRAMUTEQ) version 0.7 Alpha 2 and R Version 3.2.3, which allows a quantitative look at qualitative data, being relevant to the study of thoughts, beliefs, experiences, perceptions and opinions<sup>(18)</sup>.

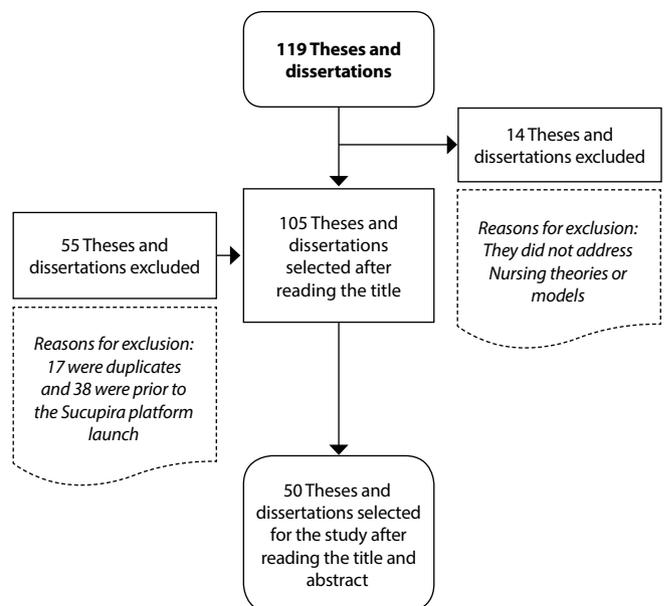
The abstracts of the included studies composed the textual corpus and from the analysis, the Text Segments (TS) and the grouping of the most significant words were identified<sup>(18)</sup>.

Among the various forms of analysis that the software allows, for this study we chose to present the results through: 1) Word cloud, in which it presents a graphic representation of the occurrences of the textual corpus, and specifies that each word

has a size proportional to its frequency. It is expressed through a figure, which does not present descriptive data, but which promotes a quick identification of the terms with the greatest meaning in the set of analyzed texts<sup>(19)</sup>. and 2) Analysis or Similarity Tree, which is anchored in graph theory and performed based on the number of occurrences of the words present in the text segments<sup>(20)</sup>. This analysis visually demonstrates the origin and connection of the words.

## RESULTS

A total of 9,809 studies were identified in the nursing area during the period analyzed, of which 119 (1.2%) were filtered by search strategies and after selection resulted in 50 (0.5%) studies with theoretical references in Nursing. As for the academic level, 15 (30%) of the selected studies were theses and 35 (70%) were dissertations, and of these 4 (11%) were related to the Professional Master's Degree. Figure 1 presents the selection flow.



**Figure 1** - Thesis and dissertation selection process for the study (n=50), São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil, 2021

Regarding the origin of the surveys, 47 (94%) were from public\*\* Higher Education Institutions, with the majority from the federal level, 34 (72%) and 13 (28%) statewide. 3 of the studies (6%) were carried out in private institutions.

The Northeast region was the one that presented the most investigations, 35 (70%), highlighting Federal University from Rio Grande do Norte with 9 (18%) studies, followed by the Southeast region with 8 (23%), the state University from Rio de Janeiro had the largest representation with 5 (62%) studies. The Midwest and South regions carried out 3 (6%) studies each and the North region only 1 (2%), as described in Table 1.

\*\* Public institutions in Brazil are supported by the federal or State governments and therefore, students do not have to pay tuitions to study there, as long as they are accepted through a selection process.

**Table 1** - Characterization of dissertations and theses according to the Brazilian region and the Institution of Higher Education (n=50), São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil, 2021

Region	Institution of Higher Education	Dissertations n (%)	Theses n (%)	Total n (%)
Northeast	<i>Universidade Federal de Alagoas</i>	4 (11%)	0(0%)	4(8%)
	<i>Universidade Federal da Bahia</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
	<i>Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
	<i>Universidade Regional do Cariri</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
	<i>Universidade Estadual do Ceará</i>	4 (11%)	3 (20%)	7(14%)
	<i>Universidade Federal do Ceará</i>	0(0%)	1 (7%)	1(2%)
	<i>Universidade Federal da Paraíba</i>	1 (3%)	2 (13%)	3(6%)
	<i>Universidade Federal de Pernambuco</i>	7 (20%)	0(0%)	7(14%)
	<i>Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte</i>	4 (11%)	5 (33%)	9(18%)
	<i>Fundação Universidade Federal de Sergipe</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
Southeast	<i>Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro</i>	0(0%)	1 (7%)	1(2%)
	<i>Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro</i>	1 (3%)	1 (7%)	2(4%)
	<i>Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
	<i>Universidade Federal Fluminense</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
	<i>Centro Universitário São Camilo</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
	<i>Universidade de Mogi das Cruzes</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
South	<i>Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
	<i>Universidade Estadual do Paraná</i>	0(0%)	1 (7%)	1(2%)
	<i>Universidade Federal de Pelotas</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
North	<i>Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina</i>	0(0%)	1 (7%)	1(2%)
	<i>Universidade Federal do Pará</i>	1 (3%)	0(0%)	1(2%)
Midwest	<i>Universidade de Brasília</i>	3 (9%)	0(0%)	3(6%)
TOTAL		35 (70%)	15 (30%)	50(100%)

**Table 2** – Characteristics of theses and dissertations regarding an area of knowledge and focus of research interest and theoretical framework, São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil, 2021

Variables	Study types	
	Dissertations n (%)	Theses n (%)
Area of Knowledge		
Adult/Elderly Health	17 (74%)	6 (260%)
Child/Adolescent Health	7 (100%)	0 (0%)
Women health	5 (71%)	2 (29%)
Mental Health	1 (33%)	2 (67%)
Collective Health	4 (80%)	1 (20%)
Nursing Management	1 (20%)	4 (80%)
Focus of research interest		
Care	28 (85%)	5 (15%)
Education	2 (67%)	1 (33%)
Research	4 (31%)	9 (69%)
Management	1 (100%)	0 (0%)
Theoretical Framework		
Roy's Adaptation Model - Sister Callista Roy	7 (70%)	3 (30%)
King's conceptual system - Imogene King	3 (75%)	1 (25%)
Goal Attainment Theory - Imogene King	2 (40%)	3 (60%)
Health Promotion Model - Nola Pender	6 (86%)	1 (14%)
Transpersonal Care Theory - Jean Watson*	3 (60%)	2 (40%)
Self-Care Deficit Theory - Dorothea Orem	3 (75%)	1 (25%)
Basic Human Needs Theory - Wanda de Aguiar Horta*	4 (100%)	0 (0%)
Tidal Model - Phil Barker	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
Culture Care Diversity And Universality - Madeline Leininger	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
Systems Model - Betty Neuman	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
Theory of Praxis Intervention in Collective Health Nursing - Emiko Yoshikawa Egry	2 (100%)	0 (0%)
Comfort Theory - Katharine Kolcaba	0 (0%)	2 (100%)
Transition Theory - Afaf Meleis	0 (0%)	1 (100%)

\* The references used in the Professional Masters were: Wanda de Aguiar Horta (2) and Jean Watson (2).

Among the 13 Nursing theories and models used, the Roy Adaptation Model stands out in 10 (20%) studies, followed by the Nola Pender Model in 7 (14%). The other theories and models had a participation equal to or less than 10% in the total selected sample.

The publications took place from 2013 to 2019, with the largest quantity of publications between 2015 and 2017, concentrating 31 (62%) studies. Adult/Elderly Health stood out as an area of knowledge, with 23 (46%) studies and with a focus of research



Other factors responsible for the prominence of the Northeast region are the expansion of the availability of courses and lines of research, generating a deepening in this theme, in addition to the increase in the number of researchers (masters and doctors) interested in the study of theories, which may have favored an increase in scientific production and dissemination in national and international literature<sup>(14,29-30)</sup>.

There was a coherence between the word cloud of the textual corpus of the abstracts and the similitude tree, which allowed us to perceive the emphasis of the concepts "health" and "nursing", the concept "person" being less frequent and the concept "environment" not being seen. It was possible to identify more significantly the individual care offered to the patient and family and little emphasis on aspects related to community care.

A significant number of theories and models were used as a theoretical framework for the development of the research selected in this study. A direction in the use of some of them was noticed in front of the lines of research of the supervisors, as some studies used the same theory as a theoretical framework in more than one research, at the same university, as occurred at Federal University from Rio Grande do Norte.

The Roy Adaptation Model of Sister Callista Roy was prevalent in this research. Another important consideration was the choice of Middle Range Theories (MRT) as theoretical references, including the Health Promotion Model by Nola Pender being the most cited 7 (14%), the Tidal Model by Phil Barker, which diverged from other studies<sup>(2,25)</sup> which only addressed Grand Theories. One of them revealed that Paterson and Zderad's Humanistic Nursing Theory, Leininger's Cultural Care Theory and Orem's Self-Care Theory represent the most researched theories by Brazilian Nursing<sup>(2)</sup>. Another study showed that the most used theoretical frameworks in dissertations and theses were: the Adaptation Model by Callista Roy, the Theory of Goal Reaching by Imogene King, the Theory of Self-Care by Dorothea Orem, the Theory of Transpersonal Care by Jean Watson and the Transcultural Theory of Madeleine Leininger, converging with the above study only the Theory of Orem and Leininger<sup>(25)</sup>.

It becomes complex to carefully establish which theoretical references presented in this research would be considered as conceptual models, since there are divergences in the scholars' conceptions. A survey carried out with nine Nursing theorists evidenced as conceptual models the studies of: Johnson, King, Levine, Neuman, Orem and Rogers and, for other scholars, the following were considered: Levine, Kim, Watson and Parse<sup>(31)</sup>. In the results of this study, the use of the term conceptual model by the authors was not observed, showing a diversity in the use of the terms Nursing theories and models freely.

Maintaining an interrelationship between theory, research and clinical practice is essential given the influence that one dimension exerts on the other for the continued development of Nursing as a profession and science<sup>(32)</sup>.

Regarding the focus of research interest in the production of knowledge in the area, the findings of this study corroborate an investigation carried out on the production of theses in Brazil, which reported a majority of theses production in the healthcare area, demonstrating greater interest by researchers in responding more questions related to practice than other areas such as research, education and management<sup>(33)</sup>.

When it comes to the word cloud, there is a high frequency of associations with academic research, that is, associated with the production of knowledge, but there is a fragile relationship/association with Nursing processes and services. This shows that even if studies that address theories and models are developed, they still do not spread across the nurses' fields of action.

As for the year of publication, an increase in dissertations and theses in 2015 and a significant decline from 2018 onwards, a limitation of this study is the understanding of such data.

The study brings in its results that most academic Graduate programs are located within Public Universities, mainly at the federal level. This offer is more discreet in private institutions in the area, where the professional Master's degree is more prevalent. The universe of private institutions that invest in academic Graduate programs is still very small, which means that a large part of the financial resources are destined to public institutions, as they have a freer profile, based on research and historically more consolidated<sup>(34)</sup>.

With the development of the science of Nursing, the question arises as to which research methods to use, which prevailed their diversity to, in this way, ensure that the results of the studies can be applied to practice<sup>(3)</sup>, which was demonstrated in this study, highlighting the qualitative approach.

Regarding the difficulties encountered in the preparation of the investigation, the lack of information in the abstracts of the studies, such as clarity in the definition of the methodology and explanation of the theoretical framework used, is highlighted. These difficulties were also found in other bibliometric studies<sup>(17,35)</sup>.

### Study limitations

The study had limitations such as access to abstracts of works carried out in the period prior to 2013, in which the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) began making available abstracts of theses and dissertations on the Sucupira Platform. To mitigate this limitation, the authors searched the online collection of theses and dissertations from the Center for Studies and Research in Nursing of the Brazilian Nursing Association. Although the aforementioned collection was not available at the time of the search, this occurrence did not invalidate the study.

### Contributions to the Nursing area

The investigation presented perspectives on the scientific production in Nursing, highlighting the need for valuing and applying the science of Nursing in postgraduate research. In addition, it highlighted a gap in the production of studies with theoretical Nursing references that reveal the phenomena related to the environment and the context in which the person/family/community is inserted.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this investigation, a diversity of theoretical Nursing references was identified, used in academic Graduate research, which represents an advance in the production of this knowledge, in professional evolution and in the possibility of applying them in different specialties and health contexts. However, their use in scientific productions in the country is still incipient, considering that they are the foundation for Nursing science.

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