



## Teaching nursing theories in nursing schools within Paraná State - Brazil\*

*Ensino de teorias de enfermagem em Cursos de Graduação em Enfermagem do Estado do Paraná – Brasil*

*Enseñanza de teorías de enfermería en el Pregrado en Enfermería del Estado de Paraná – Brasil*

Jéssica Carvalho de Matos<sup>1</sup>, Geisa dos Santos Luz<sup>2</sup>, Janaína de Souza Marcolino<sup>1</sup>, Maria Dalva de Barros Carvalho<sup>3</sup>, Sandra Marisa Peloso<sup>4</sup>

### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** To identify how education on nursing theory is addressed in undergraduate nursing courses in schools of higher education in the state of Parana. **Methods:** A survey was conducted using a sample of the 35 coordinators of the nursing course of higher education institutions of the State of Parana, Brazil. **Results:** 35 courses were identified that focused on nursing theory. The students are introduced to nursing theory early in the curriculum, usually at the beginning of the nursing program. Wanda Horta's theory was mentioned as the theory on which many courses were based (60%). **Conclusion:** The teaching of nursing theory is conducted in a fragmented manner, which may contribute to nurses' experience of low autonomy, and a lack of clear understanding regarding all of the areas of concern that the profession encompasses.

**Keywords:** Nursing theory; Teaching; Higher education; Brazil

### RESUMO

**Objetivos:** Identificar de que forma o ensino de teorias de enfermagem é abordado nos Cursos de Graduação em Enfermagem de escolas de ensino superior no Estado do Paraná. **Métodos:** Estudo do tipo *Survey*, realizado com 35 coordenadores de Curso de enfermagem instituições de ensino superior do Estado do Paraná- Brasil. **Resultados:** Os 35 cursos abordam as teorias de enfermagem. O contato que os discentes têm com as teorias de enfermagem dá-se de forma pontual, geralmente, quando se inicia o curso de enfermagem. A teoria de Wanda Horta foi a mais citada, como teoria base do curso (60%). **Conclusão:** O ensino das teorias é ministrado, como conteúdo de forma fragmentada, o que pode contribuir para a formação de profissionais com baixa autonomia, sem delimitação de seu campo de atuação.

**Descritores:** Teoria de Enfermagem; Ensino; Educação superior; Brasil

### RESUMEN

**Objetivos:** Identificar de qué forma se aborda la enseñanza de teorías de enfermería en el Pregrado de Enfermería de escuelas de enseñanza superior del estado de Paraná. **Métodos:** Se trata de un estudio de tipo *Survey*, realizado con 35 coordinadores del Pregrado de Enfermería en instituciones de enseñanza superior del Estado de Paraná- Brasil. **Resultados:** Los 35 cursos abordan las teorías de enfermería. El contacto que los discentes tienen con las teorías de enfermería se da de forma puntual, generalmente, cuando se inicia el curso de enfermería. La teoría de Wanda Horta fue la más citada, como teoría base del curso (60%). **Conclusión:** La enseñanza de las teorías es administrado como contenido de forma fragmentada, lo que puede contribuir para la formación de profesionales con baja autonomía, sin delimitación de su campo de actuación.

**Descriptores:** Teoría de Enfermería; Enseñanza; Educación superior; Brasil

\* Study conducted with the coordinators of Undergraduate Nursing Courses of higher education institutions in the state of Paraná, Brazil

<sup>1</sup> Undergraduate Nursing Course, "Faculdade Ingá – Unidade de Ensino Superior Ingá" – Maringá (PR), Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Medicine, "Universidade Estadual de Maringá" – UEM-Maringá (PR), Brazil.

<sup>3</sup> Postgraduate Nursing Course, "Universidade Federal de Rio Grande" – FURG – Rio Grande (RS), Brazil.

## INTRODUCTION

The nursing profession, in addition to other professions, has faced and still faces the consequences of fast technological and scientific advancement in the last decades. As a result of this advance, the first nursing theoreticians appeared in the 1950s, represented by professionals who were concerned about understanding and describing their functions and roles, thus enabling the nursing practice to be understood. These nurses sought to identify a unique conceptual field for this profession, independent from the medical model in particular, seeking greater professional autonomy<sup>(1)</sup>.

Theory constitutes a systematic form of perception of the world with the purpose of understanding it, becoming the way to characterize a phenomenon and to point the aspects that identify it<sup>(2)</sup>.

The application of a theory to the nursing practice seems to represent a growing interest among nurses. The use of theory supports nurses in the definition of their roles, better knowledge of reality and the resulting adequacy and quality of professional development, enabling clients to undergo the least harmful procedures and types of care possible, challenging current practices, creating new approaches and remodeling the structure of norms and existing principles<sup>(3-5)</sup>.

Nursing theory can be described as an instrument of work that emphasizes scientific knowledge, showing the trends of views of the health-disease process and the experience of therapeutic care. Thus, Nursing, as science, includes a set of theories based on the practice of care, conceptualizing health, man, the environment and nursing itself. Its definitions are influenced by both theoreticians and its social, political and philosophical context, so that nursing theory and practice can be complementary moments of the praxis<sup>(6)</sup>.

The object of study of nursing is human care, seeking a unique body of knowledge as science, once it develops its activities based on knowledge from other sciences. The specific theories, models and concepts of nursing must be dealt with in an organized and structured way, because they represent an important instrument for practical application, whether in teaching, research or health care<sup>(7)</sup>.

The study of the knowledge produced by Nursing from theories shows the view of reality of theoreticians, in addition to the understanding of professionals' experiences. Theoretical knowledge influences reality and this also influences the development of theories. The selection of a theory must be guided by a clear purpose or subject of interest. Usually, one chooses to work with a theory according to personal expectations, because this represents a systematic way of looking at the world to describe it, explain it or predict it. Thus, it is understood

that theory is the path to understand a phenomenon, through its characterization, indicating those aspects or characteristics that give it identity<sup>(6-7)</sup>. As a result, it is the complete nursing theory that has a context, content and process; consequently, the context is the environment where the practice of nursing takes place, the content is the subject of theory and the process is the method through which the nurse puts theory into practice<sup>(2)</sup>.

In this context, the nursing process can be understood as a method that organizes and provides nursing health care or nursing health care methodology. By discussing the nursing process, the importance of using Nursing Theories should be emphasized, aiming to direct nurses' thinking, observation and interpretation of reality. Thus, theories seek to guide the domain of nursing responsibilities and enable professionals to record services and results<sup>(8)</sup>.

Higher education institutions are expected to be committed to the life of the professionals they qualify, combining the highest level of academic qualification with social commitment, and indicating the way to overcome fragmentation of knowledge. Experts emphasize that schools should seek to meet the modern needs of population health, based on their curricula or from any changes they make to these curricula. With a reflective and critical qualification process, nurses would be qualified to nearly fulfill the need to meet the local and regional demands<sup>(6,9)</sup>.

In view of this problem, the present study aimed to identify how the teaching of Nursing Theories is approached in Undergraduate Nursing Courses of higher education institutions in the state of Paraná.

## METHODS

A survey was conducted to enable information about prevalence, distribution and inter-relation of variables to be obtained, in the context of a population. This information can refer to individuals' types of knowledge, actions, intentions or attitudes. The data obtained from this type of study can be collected in several ways, usually through in-person and telephone interviews and self-administered questionnaires<sup>(10)</sup>.

Individuals in this survey were Undergraduate Nursing Course coordinators of higher education institutions in the state of Paraná, Brazil.

Of all 42 institutions, 35 coordinators accepted to participate in the study and seven were excluded due to refusal to participate or difficulty in finding the coordinator. All participating higher education institutions were recognized by the Ministry of Education in Paraná, during the research period, between October and November 2007.

The data collection instrument selected was a

structured questionnaire with questions about the characterization of higher education institutions of the state of Paraná and respective Undergraduate Nursing Course coordinators and questions about the teaching of Nursing Theories.

An online survey of higher education nursing courses, registered with the *Conselho Regional de Enfermagem - PR* (State of Paraná Regional Nursing Council) was conducted.

After this survey, coordinators were contacted by telephone and/or email to verify the interest and possibility of participating in this study, when the date and time of interviews were set. On the date set for the telephone interview, interviewers read the Informed Consent Form (ICF) and research subjects accepted and agreed with the ICF or not. Telephone contacts were recorded and these recordings were kept as a guarantee of agreement between both parts.

Data were subsequently analyzed, using simple and percentage frequency calculation.

This research project was approved by the *Comitê de Ética da Universidade Estadual de Maringá 386/2007* (Maringá State University Ethics Committee), according to Resolution 196/96 of the Brazilian Ministry of Health<sup>(11)</sup>.

## RESULTS

### Characterization of coordinators

The profile of coordinators was determined by aspects associated with sex, length of time since graduation, length of time working as a professor, length of time working in the current institution, and titles (Specialization, Master or Ph.D.).

Of all the 35 professors who coordinated the Undergraduate Nursing Courses, 91.4% were females, a fact that had been expected, given the predominance of women in this profession<sup>(9)</sup>. Mean length of time since graduation was 15.8 years.

Mean length of time working as a professor was 9.91 years, and 68.6% of participants had from one to ten years of teaching experience. With regard to the length of time working in the current higher education institution, 80% had between one and ten years of experience. The majority of coordinators had a maximum length of time of ten years in the current higher education institution. Of all coordinators, three stood out because of their greater teaching experience of 20, 26 and 30 years, respectively. Of these, only two had always worked in the same institutions, one of which was private, while the other was public.

With regard to titles, 48.6 % were Masters, 34.3% had a Specialization and 17.1% were Ph.D.s. The majority of coordinators (4) with a Ph.D. worked in private

institutions.

### Characterization of the institutions

The characterization of the higher education institutions that offered Undergraduate Nursing Courses in the state of Paraná was conducted, including their classification (public or private), course periods, number of students per class and course duration.

Of all 35 institutions, 80% were private; ten nursing courses were held on a full-time basis, six in the mornings and six in the evenings exclusively. A total of 11 institutions (31.3%) alternated two Nursing course periods, and two faculties (5.7%) did not respond to this question.

The number of students per class varied from 35 to 80, with a predominance of 40 students (37.1%) and 50 students (20%) per class.

In the majority of institutions, the duration of the Nursing course was four years, totaling 80% of all courses, 8.6% lasted five years, 8.6% (3) included courses that lasted four and five years and only one (2.8%) lasted four and a half years.

### Teaching of Nursing Theories

In view of the importance of this theme in the curricular structure and, consequently, in the qualification of a critical professional, capable of providing quality nursing care, coordinators were asked whether Nursing Theories were approached in the Nursing courses and whether there was a specific discipline for this theme.

According to participants, the theme was approached in 35 Nursing courses (100%) of higher education institutions. Of these, 11.4% have a specific discipline for Nursing Theories, such as History and Professional Regulation (36 credits) and Nursing Care Methodology (54 credits), both from the same institution; Nursing Theories, taught in two institutions with total times of 60 credits and 54 credits; and Care Process I (72 credits). One of the coordinators reported not knowing whether there is a discipline of Nursing Theories.

In the majority of higher education institutions, the content was offered in the first year of course (74.3%), followed by the second year (48%) and third and fourth years (20% each). The question allowed for more than one alternative, i.e. the content was offered in more than one year, in certain institutions.

The Nursing Theories most frequently mentioned by participants were those of Wanda Horta (60%), Oren (17.1%), and Leininger (11.4%), and those least frequently mentioned were those of Marta Roger, Watson, King, Peplau, Orlando, Angel, Henderson, Roy, and Evangelisa (Table 1).

A total of three coordinators (8.6%) reported not

knowing which theory was approached in the Nursing course and 18 (51.4%) mentioned that all theories were approached. When these last coordinators were asked what theories were particularly approached, ten gave examples of Nursing Theories.

**Table 1.** Nursing Theories approached in Undergraduate Nursing Theories in the state of Paraná, Brazil, between October and November 2007.

Theory approached	n	%
Wanda Horta	21	60
Todas	14	40
Oren	6	17.1
Leininger	4	11.4
NHB	4	11.4
Marta Roger	3	8.6
Watson	2	5.7
King	2	5.7
Peplau	2	5.7
Orlando	2	5.7
Nanda, Carpenito	2	5.7
SAE	1	2.8
Angel	1	2.8
Evangelisa	1	2.8
Roy	1	2.8
Henders on	1	2.8
Does not know	3	8.6

Among the professors responsible for teaching the discipline, 16 were Masters (45.7%), 14 had a Specialization (40%), and four were Ph.D.s (11.4%) and one had only an undergraduate degree (2.8%).

With regard to the existence of a research, teaching or extension project associated with Nursing Theories, 28.6% of higher education institutions included a certain project with this approach, while the remaining ones did not have such projects. The types of projects most frequently found were those related to Nursing Care Systematization, found in four institutions, and with three coordinators reporting the existence of a project, although not detailing its characteristics. The remaining projects mentioned were "Hospital Management", "Perioperative Outpatient Care" and "Surgical Center, using Ida Orlando as Framework".

## DISCUSSION

In this study, the frequency of private higher education institutions in Paraná was significant. According to Decree 2,306 of August 19th, 1997, higher education institutions are classified as follows, in terms of their legal nature: public, when created or incorporated, maintained and managed by the government; and private, when maintained and managed

by a legal entity or natural person with private rights<sup>(12)</sup>.

With regard to the diversity of Undergraduate Nursing Courses in this study, since 1996, there has been the publication of the *Lei das Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional* (National Education Bases and Directives Law), and the transference of autonomy to higher education institutions in terms of aspects of organization, structure and operationalization of the curriculum, adapting this to their reality, number of vacancies, course periods, plans, programs and extension and scientific research projects<sup>(12)</sup>. This statement supports the diversities of nursing theory approaches found in this study.

The objective of the Nursing Process is to provide a structure that meets the individual needs of the client, family and community, and its property is that it is based on theories. For this process to be used in an efficient way, the application of nursing concepts and theories is necessary, in addition to the application of biological and physical sciences, among others, enabling a rational basis for making decisions and judgments, interpersonal relations and nursing practices<sup>(13)</sup>.

The teaching of Nursing Theories provides students with the basis for health care and it also enables one to know the scientific roots of the profession. The approach to this theme with an emphasis on the beginning of the undergraduate course is interesting, even for an in-depth view of what Nursing is and its theories, continuing throughout students' qualification.

The contact that students have with Nursing Theories usually occurs in an exact way, in the beginning of the Nursing course. This fact can result in difficulty in associating the theoretical contents with practice, which interferes with the understanding of what a nursing theory represents. Throughout the course, there are no more significant approaches to theories, causing them to be forgotten. This, as a result, may lead to a lack of attempts to apply theories to health care for clients, in one's professional career<sup>(14)</sup>.

To achieve knowledge, it is necessary to know that the art of Nursing care is based on scientific practice and, consequently, knowledge about theories is required. It is evident that scientific knowledge, including Nursing Theories, is the basis to subsidize the teaching of Nursing practice and quality of care<sup>(15)</sup>.

In Brazil, the theoretician Wanda de Aguiar Horta is emphasized, who first contributed to the performance of studies and research projects since the 1960s and 1970s, when she proposed a health care model based on the Basic Human Needs Theory<sup>(13)</sup>. According to data from Table 1, Horta represents the most frequently mentioned health care model/conceptual model.

A health care model, as the above mentioned one, is an instrument that helps to systematize health care and to enable the means to organize clients' information and



data to provide care and to evaluate the results of the health care process<sup>(15)</sup>.

Data show terminologies that usually cause professionals applying these models to feel confused. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish them, so that these “semantics” can be demystified in the construction and organization of the nursing process. Health care models are representations, expressed verbally or through symbols, schemes, drawings, graphs and diagrams, and they are aimed at providing nurses with the resources needed for their performance<sup>(16)</sup>. In contrast, Nursing Theories reveal more specific and concrete sets of concepts that guide, describe and explain Nursing phenomena<sup>(17)</sup>.

The meaning of the conceptual model, which seems to be routinely used in discourses of nursing scientific production, should also be looked into. This shows how several concepts are interconnected, being used with a high level of abstraction and generalization and with the possibility of being considered a thought or notion<sup>(17)</sup>.

In a study conducted in the Department of Nursing of the *Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina*, the opinions and experiences of theory and nursing practice of nurses who work with teaching and health care were identified and a comparison was made between these results and those of another study, which had the same objective and was performed in 1979. As a result, Horta's Basic Human Needs Theory continued to be the one most frequently used in the teaching and practice of these nurses<sup>(18)</sup>.

Study participants reported that none of the professors who taught Nursing Theories had a postgraduate degree in this area, a fact that could reflect the lack of interest in or low availability of this line of research. This condition can be observed since graduation, when students do not perceive the importance of theories in their professional practice. This lack of interest can result in health care not based on science, performed in a mechanical way, without reflections.

The advancement of Nursing is perceptible, in terms of the provision of health care, founded on scientific principles. However, there are still concerns about nursing being accepted as science, increasing the need to construct a specific body of knowledge in this profession.

In this context, Nursing Theories represent an instrument used to direct and guide the Nursing practice in the search for specificity<sup>(14)</sup>.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the perspective of describing how Nursing Theories are approached, this study enabled the identification of the profile of coordinators of Undergraduate Nursing Courses in the state of Paraná: 91.4% were females; mean length of time since graduation was 15.8 years; mean length of time working as a professor was 9.1 years; 80% had worked in the current institution for a period between one and ten years; and 48.6% were Masters.

The following was found with regard to the institutions: 80% were private; 28.6% of the courses were given on a full-time basis; the number of students per class varied between 35 and 80; and 80% of the courses lasted four years.

The undergraduate Nursing courses of higher education institutions in the state of Paraná approached Nursing Theories, although this teaching is not usually linked to practical activities that may arouse students' interest. It should also be noted that Nursing Theories are taught as content in a fragmented way in the first years of the undergraduate course exclusively, which may contribute to the qualification of merely technical professionals with undeveloped reflective capacity, requiring professionals with low autonomy to be qualified, and without restricting their field of work.

Conflicts in terminology were evident in participants' speech, thus indicating the need for the reconstruction of Nursing as science. As a result, the teaching of health care in the perspective of Nursing Theories can be conducted with more seriousness, coherence and responsibility when combined with practice.

The teaching of Nursing Theories needs to be conducted in a systematized way by professors who are committed to their students' learning. This content should be sufficiently broad for future nurses to be able to decide which theory is the most suitable for their field of work. Thus, qualified professionals will graduate and provide adequate care for those in need.

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