

Who uses nursing theory? A univariate descriptive analysis of five years' research articles

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Background: Since the early 1950s, nursing leaders have worked diligently to build the Scientific Discipline of Nursing, integrating Theory, Research and Practice. Recently, the role of theory has again come into question, with some scientists claiming nurses are not using theory to guide their research, with which to improve practice.

Aims: The purposes of this descriptive study were to determine: (i) Were nursing scientists' research articles in leading nursing journals based on theory? (ii) If so, were the theories nursing theories or borrowed theories? (iii) Were the theories integrated into the studies, or were they used as organizing frameworks?

Methods: Research articles from seven top ISI journals were analyzed, excluding regularly featured columns, met analyses, secondary analysis, case studies and literature reviews. The authors used King's dynamic Interacting system and Goal Attainment Theory as an organizing framework. They developed consensus on how to identify the integration of theory, searching the Title, Abstract, Aims, Methods, Discussion and Conclusion sections of each research article, whether quantitative or qualitative.

Results: Of 2857 articles published in the seven journals from 2002 to, and including, 2006, 2184 (76%) were research articles. Of the 837 (38%) authors who used theories, 460 (55%) used nursing theories, 377 (45%) used other theories: 776 (93%) of those who used theory integrated it into their studies, including qualitative studies, while 51 (7%) reported they used theory as an organizing framework for their studies. Closer analysis revealed theory principles were implicitly implied, even in research reports that did not explicitly report theory usage.

Conclusions: Increasing numbers of nursing research articles (though not percentagewise) continue to be guided by theory, and not always by nursing theory. Newer nursing research methods may not explicitly state the use of nursing theory, though it is implicitly implied

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