

## Nursing Science: A Reflection from the Perspective of Jurgen Habermas' Knowledge Interests Theory

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### Editorial

Health sciences (HS) focus their research on the prevention, maintenance or recuperation of human health and on the diagnosis and treatment of an illness, together with patient care [1]. A variety of different clinical disciplines are encompassed within this epigraph, such as medicine, physiotherapy or nursing, basic sciences such as biology or pharmacology or parts of more humanistic disciplines such as psychology. A philosophical reflection on the HS therefore indicates a confluence of scientific and humanistic knowledge [2]. However, a vision from a clinical and research results oriented point of view confirms that presently, scientific-technical rationality, scientific evidence and the standardization of processes are predominant factors which set out the guidelines in the health sciences. With reference to the health-illness concept, the laboratory determines what is normal and what is pathological [3,4], hospitals provide the backdrop for recovery and care and the professionals search for objectivity. Considering this uniform paradigm, the disciplines related to the HS look to give answers to questions related to health, life and death; a position which, in relation to nursing, has the potential to cause controversy.

Currently, the HS essentially focus their research processes on the explanation, description and prediction of phenomena. Stemming from modernity, the separation of scientific and humanistic knowledge, together with the adoption of a concept of theory similar to natural science, has, in many ways, reduced health research to the study of measurable dimensions. This situation has led to profound theoretical, practical and epistemological consequences [5]. This text does not seek to discuss the implications that significant developments related to medical, biomedical and genetic research have had for human health. However, such a successful model in terms of scientific, economic and developmental benefits could also prove problematic. Although research in health sciences points towards the study of molecules, organs or systems, it should also include the human being as a whole, in which biological, psychological, social and cultural factors converge [6]. Serious questions emerge regarding to the classifying of HS as a paradigm or a uniform model of knowledge. It is therefore pertinent to ask ourselves, "Does the HS exclusively generate positive knowledge, similar to natural science?" "Does scientific knowledge suppose their only intra-theoretical interest?"

An attempt to find replies to these questions leads us to review the theses presented by Jürgen Habermas in his work Knowledge and Interest [7]. Contrary to the valorative neutrality and objectivism of modern sciences, theory, for Habermas, does not free knowledge from life interests but instead appears to be strengthened by its concealment. Knowledge is always "interested" or affected, an issue which the author

makes clear in empirical-analytical, historical-hermeneutic and critical sciences, where the prevalence of a technical interest, a practical interest and an emancipatory interest can be found respectively. However, Habermas does not mention anything regarding the HS, with it being relevant to explore what type of fundamental interest, not particular, takes precedence in these sciences, making specific reference to nursing science.

The discipline of nursing faces various challenges in the 21st century [8], among which the epistemological founding of an own knowledge within the general framework of the HS should be highlighted; a base for its consolidation as an autonomous profession and science. The concept of theory derived from logical empiricism is problematic for nursing knowledge, as although it includes part of its object of study, it does not provide answers nor does it adapt to many problems and situations which nurses experience and deal with in their clinical activity [4]. Considering Habermasian theory, in the HS we can generally find the three constitutive knowledge interests; technical, critical and emancipatory. However, although disciplines which are more established in terms of research, such as medicine, carry out their investigations following a predominantly technical interest, we should ask ourselves what type of intra-theoretical interest takes precedence in nursing science.

Technical interest is an interest in the control and command of nature. Nurses look to offer safe care for the patient, the family and the community, carrying out a practice based on evidence which supports their decision making in clinical activity. Nursing research, in terms of technical interest, produces scientific evidence regarding nursing care [9]. In this sense, the development of nursing research in relation to basic care, satisfying needs or health education is becoming more and more important in international literature.

Furthermore, from a practical interest point of view, in inter-subjective communication and relationships [10], nurses care for the patient in a process which, in turn, is a source of knowledge. Illness, pain, life and death create a unique context of experiences for the patient, the family and the carers, which the nurse must deal with and understand as a research field in itself [11]. Care is based on a constant "being there mentally and being there physically", in biographical coordinates unique in time and space. Removed from all generalizable knowledge, this situation shapes a shared framework of meanings which allows for access to the intimate and personal [12]. From here stems a knowledge which the nursing discipline should acknowledge as its own in the general framework of the HS. Committing to practical interest as the driving force of nursing research also implies making research methods consistent with the philosophical principles which support it [13].

Cogniscitive emancipatory interest, linked to self-reflection, is principally associated with critical sciences, but it is also constitutive of the HS. In linking scientific knowledge with the individual and social context, it acts as a mediator between the culture of experts and the life world [7], hence its emancipatory character. It is derived from an interest for autonomy in making free and considered decisions, with the aim of happiness and a dignified life/death [14,15]. Nurse-patient interaction brings two subjects face-to-face, both capable of language and action [10], who coordinate their plans from a viewpoint of understanding, negotiation and consensus. The figure of the nurse as a defender of the patient or the employment of methodologies focused on emerging difficulties or health disparities provide a good example of this interest in nursing research [16].

The theory which defines the natural sciences shows the reality under the guidance of an interest for information, intervention and technical control of processes. However, knowledge in HS cannot be reduced solely to a type of theory which excludes individual experiences. If explanation relates to the command of physical things, understanding does so with people [17], a difficult separation for the HS but above all, for nursing science. Empirical-analytical, historical-hermeneutic and critical knowledge converge in the HS; in their related disciplines, technical, practical and emancipatory interest can be found. In nursing science, the constitutive knowledge interests can also be evident, but it cannot compete on equal terms with disciplines such as medicine or pharmacology, which, from a technical interest point of view, have developed and established their research programs in more depth. However, in its effort to establish its own knowledge, different from the other HS disciplines, nursing science should strengthen practical and emancipatory interest contributions in its research program. The interest for practice entails a more pluralistic understanding of science, placing an emphasis on the creation of scientific models which are more adapted to determinate contexts. Without forgetting technical interest, a commitment to practical and emancipatory interests, those constitutive of nursing science, could help to clarify its epistemological positioning, research and genesis of theory.

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