Realism in Nursing

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There are several schools of thought regarding philosophy in nursing. Philosophy takes into account how things work and uses that knowledge to define the nursing profession. Simply stated, a philosophy is a set of ideas or beliefs relating to a particular field or activity. Philosophies in nursing are also the groundwork to nursing theories (Blais, 2006). Philosophies that are applied to the nursing field include the different schools of thought: idealism, realism, pragmatic, and existentialism. The school of thought that I identify with is the realist approach to nursing. In this paper, I will describe my realist philosophy of nursing.

Realism

Realism is the view that “there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, our thoughts, feelings and attitudes” (Searle, 1999). Realism has been the foremost-accepted philosophy of science, especially in the realm of social science. However, realism transcends both natural and social science. Realism incorporates experiences, events and mechanisms of events (Wainwright, 1997). In nursing school, you are taught theories of nursing practice and how to apply them in clinical situations. However, when you graduate and move on to a job in the healthcare industry, you find that the ideals you are taught in nursing school clash with the reality of the nursing world. In the nursing profession, realism is what you come to understand as the opposite of the idealist views you learn in nursing school. A realist nurse knows that pain is subjective to the patient; however, if you state that your abdominal pain is 10/10 but you are laughing with family and friends and asking for food then your pain is probably not a 10/10. The realist approach in nursing is very definitive in that if you are sick then you should appear sick or have signs and symptoms that suggest illness. Realist nurses focus on actual patient specific care and how it affects the patient, and not a certain ideal patient care that is based on learned theories.

The Nurse as Health Promoter and Care Provider

Nursing practice is composed of individual responses, procedures and relations between the nurse and the patient. Together, the nurse and patient form a unified front faced with the challenge of averting disease, bringing about healthy outcomes and promoting healthy lifestyles as the basis of nursing practice (Whelton, 2002). Competently providing care for a patients actual needs and being their advocate characterize realism. The nurse is essentially giving value to the patients’ illness and their immediate needs to treat their illness. For example, a patient who presents in the emergency room experiencing abdominal pain 10/10 with vomiting would be provided with a comfortable place to lie down, medicine to combat their vomiting and intravenous fluids for hydration. The realist nurse would attend to all of the patient’s immediate needs and reassess the patient for any new signs or symptoms. The realist nurse also addresses the patient’s need for health promotion education. When a final diagnosis is reached the patient is provided with an appropriate diet, means to prevent the symptoms from returning and education regarding the diagnosis. The nurse provides the best care possible and establishes a rapport with the patient, but not beyond the realm of dealing with the immediate issue. Realist nurses view patients based on illness or injury and provide care based on the treatment that is specific to that illness or injury.

The Nurse as a Learner

Research has proven that a nurse who delivers a higher level of care and thoroughly enjoys their role as a nurse strives to better themselves through furthering their education and holding memberships in professional organizations (Smalley, 2005). To maintain the highest level of care, a nurse needs to take continuing education courses to be up to date on the most recent methods of care and to maintain competencies in her practice. Actively being involved in a professional organization also affords the nurse access to up to date theories, research and ethical positions in healthcare. The realist nurse philosophy on education is that added knowledge raises the level of care you provide to your patients. Choosing to increase your knowledge through formal education or continuing education also affords you growth opportunities in the nursing field.

Lifelong learning improves competency, patient care, and nursing satisfaction. Competent nurses can function more autonomously, think critically through problems, and provide the level of care they desire. Competency and autonomy increase job satisfaction (Smalley, 2005).

As a realist, it is personally important for me to continue my education to attain the goal of a competent nurse who is continually growing through her experiences in her job and formal instruction.

Ethical and Civic Responsibilities

A nurse’s ethics are based on personal beliefs, values and experiences. As a realist nurse, ethics are very black and white. You must focus on what is most appropriate for your patient and advocate for that patient (Blais, 2006). For example, if you have a pregnant rape victim who wants to abort her unborn child; you must advocate for her rights to have that abortion as long as her health status can withstand the procedure. Civically a nurse should be involved with community issues and helping establish solutions to resolve those issues. Taking an active role in the community is essential for the realist nurse because it provides the opportunity to educate friends and neighbors about health issues affecting the community. Ethic and civic responsibility shape the nurse’s ability to identify with the patient’s wishes and the communities needs.

Conclusion

The realist nurse is a fact finder. Her knowledge and nursing practice are based on the facts that have been provided to her through education and experiences in the healthcare setting. As a realist, she values the truth in medicine. Her patient care is based on the information that has been provided to her through her interaction with her patient (Porter). Realism is the focus of her patient care model which includes educating her patient about healthy lifestyle changes, basic precautions to preventing illness and promoting good health practices. The realist nurse as a learner is focused on furthering her education as a nurse, thus providing her a broader spectrum of professional opportunities. As a collaborator and colleague, the realist provides the healthcare team with the specific information that is relevant to the patients’ current health status. To sum up, the realist nurse is to know that she sees things as they are and not as they might be. Her concern is the vital information that will aid in providing the patient with the highest level of care and attaining knowledge through practice and schooling that allows for the furthering of her professional career (Smalley, 2005).

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