
dates, that is, 1952 *through* 1985. This makes a one-year difference in the database discussed in the article.

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THEORY TESTING RESEARCH: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

To the editor:

I read with great interest Silva's article "Research Testing Nursing Theory: State of the Art" in the October 1986 issue of *ANS*. I believe, however, that one methodological decision made by Silva requires some elaboration.

"State of the art" is defined in Webster's Dictionary as "the level of development (as a device, procedure, process, technique or science) reached at any particular time." The state of the art of theory-testing research, then, should reflect the level of development of all research that tests theory. Silva decided to include only published research, excluding all unpublished research, particularly doctoral dissertations and master's theses. It seems to me, however, that to obtain a complete perspective, a state of the art view, it is necessary to include both published and unpublished research. A large portion of the research being conducted in nursing is done by graduate students. To exclude their work in a review such as this minimizes their contribution to the knowledge base of the discipline.

One might argue that by including only published research in the review, a minimum standard of scientific rigor and merit is ensured. However, students completing dissertations and theses have departmental and university requirements that must be met and these help to ensure scientific acceptability, ie, merit and rigor. To me, there is a major differ-

ence between *unpublished* research and *unpublishable* research. Unpublishable research (scientifically unacceptable) is a small subset of the domain of unpublished research. Unfortunately, a great deal of scientifically acceptable research never gets into print, for a variety of reasons.

Silva probably realized (and rightly so) that to include unpublished research in her review would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do. I know from personal experience how hard it is to obtain dissertations and theses. Dissertation abstracts are available in *Dissertation Abstracts International*, but acquiring the actual dissertations is expensive and time consuming. As for theses, no compilation of thesis titles exists that I am aware of, so the first step of identifying possible theses for review is essentially impossible. I can understand why Silva made the methodological decision to include only published research in her review. But understanding her decision does not fully address the issues that are apparent as a result of having read this review. Specifically, I think it is important to realize that this review is a limited view of the state of the art of theory-testing research and this should be made explicit. I would even venture that the title state of the art is not completely accurate.

A more generalized issue relates to the process of disseminating and communicating research results. While individual researchers have a responsibility to present research results, both orally and in published form, the larger professional community should focus more attention on how research reports are catalogued and accessed. A regularly published list of thesis and dissertation titles could be a beginning catalogue; easy accessibility could be achieved by establishing a national archive housing copies of all reports of research done by nurses. Sigma Theta Tau is planning a Center for Nursing Scholarship—maybe the center could serve as a central archival location. These are only two ideas—I

am sure there are many other possible solutions.

However, while there may be many solutions, the problem remains: Without accurate information about research being conducted in the discipline, can we ever know exactly what is the state of the art?

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Author's response:

I am genuinely sympathetic to Ms. Nicoll's comments about the exclusion of unpublished works (particularly theses and dissertations) in my article, "Research Testing Nursing Theory: State of the Art." However, Ms. Nicoll makes the assumption that the decision to exclude unpublished work was mine, when it was not.

Some background information should help clarify this point. The database for this article (ie, the 62 studies mentioned therein) primarily came from a manuscript of mine soon to be published in the *Annual Review of Nursing Research (ARNR)* (see reference number 12). Because the *ARNR* series are edited volumes with many contributors, the editors have had to establish some basic guidelines to ensure consistency across reviews. One of my guidelines was that the review was to include *published* research; use of unpublished doctoral dissertations was discouraged. Since this was editorial policy that I felt could be legitimately justified, I honored it.

Nevertheless, clarification of this point does not elucidate the conceptual issue of whether unpublished works (in particular, theses and dissertations) should be included in state of

the art reviews or other works. The two sides of this issue have been alluded to by Ms. Nicoll. Let me spell them out more explicitly, as I have heard the arguments.

1. *Against use of unpublished doctoral dissertations:* Doctoral dissertations are conducted primarily to learn about research; thus they contain many more conceptual and methodological problems than research conducted by seasoned researchers. Consequently, few manuscripts based on doctoral dissertations get published in leading research journals because they cannot meet the rigorous standards of scientific merit. Therefore, to include them in written works would jeopardize the validity of the works as the conclusions drawn may be based on invalid data that have not met peer-reviewed scientific standards. However, if data from doctoral dissertations remain unpublished, one is left with one of two unsettling conclusions: The author of the dissertation chose not to publish the results of the dissertation, for whatever reasons, thus neglecting a professional responsibility to publish research results, or the author attempted to publish the dissertation data but was unsuccessful, thus raising doubts about the study's scientific merit.
2. *In defense of use of unpublished doctoral dissertations:* Because research is unpublished does not mean it lacks scientific merit. Doctoral dissertation research follows carefully specified university research requirements and is conducted under the auspices of a committee of research experts, thus helping to ensure scientific validity. In addition, the scientific body of knowledge in nursing is relatively new; therefore, we cannot afford to dismiss the research of an increasingly growing number of potential scholars—doctoral students or candidates. To exclude their research from a state of the