

# A theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice as a complex system



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# Disclosures and learning objectives

- Co-author and collaborator  
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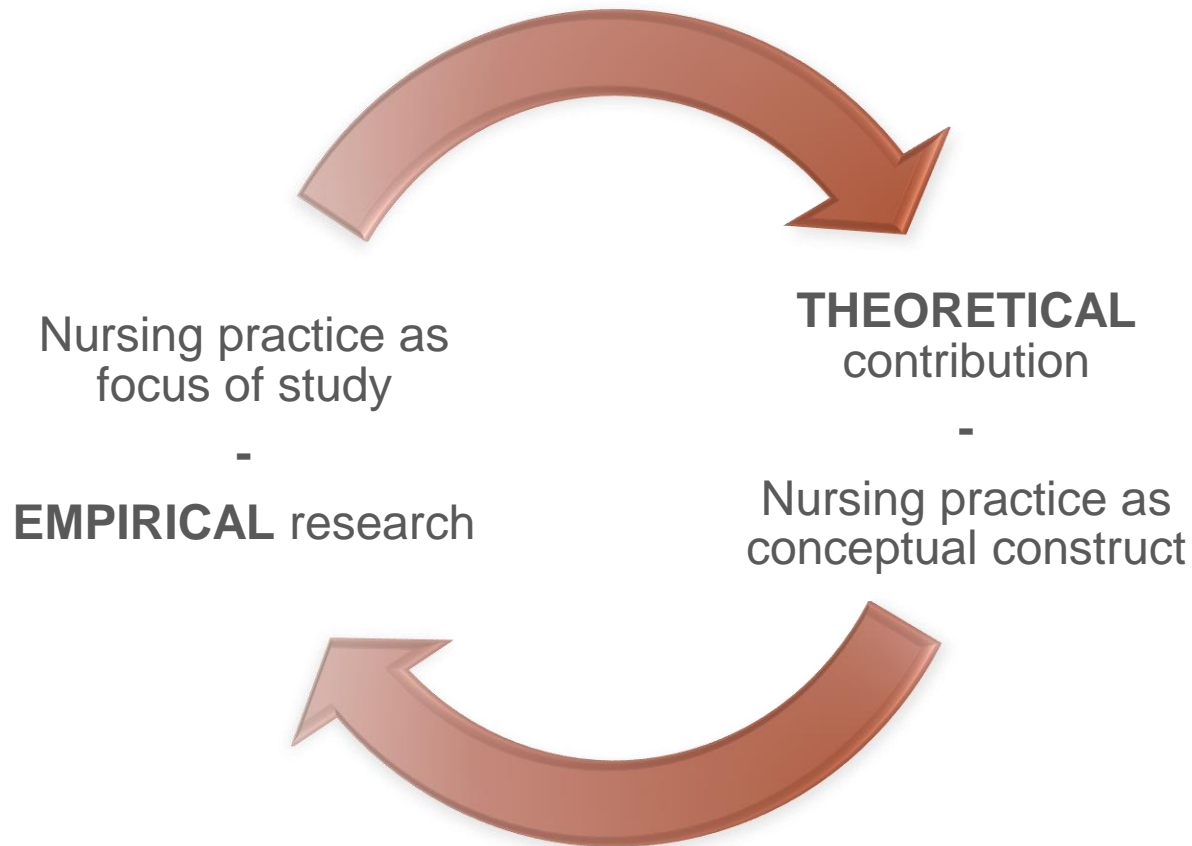
## **Learning objectives for this presentation**

- Familiarise participants with the concept of nursing practice from a disciplinary perspective;
- Appreciate the value of a complexity lens to capture dynamic interconnections between nursing practice components and processes;
- Identify emerging issues in contemporary conceptualisations of nursing practice.

# Background

- The concept of nursing practice is fundamental to the discipline and science of nursing.
- Empirical research on nursing practice is critical to support evidence-based practice, but it is not sufficient.
- It is essential to conceptualise nursing practice to situate findings derived from empirical research within the disciplinary field of nursing knowledge.
- We present conceptual work combined with an empirical study of nursing practice with vulnerable populations to inform theory of nursing practice.

# Disciplinary nursing knowledge



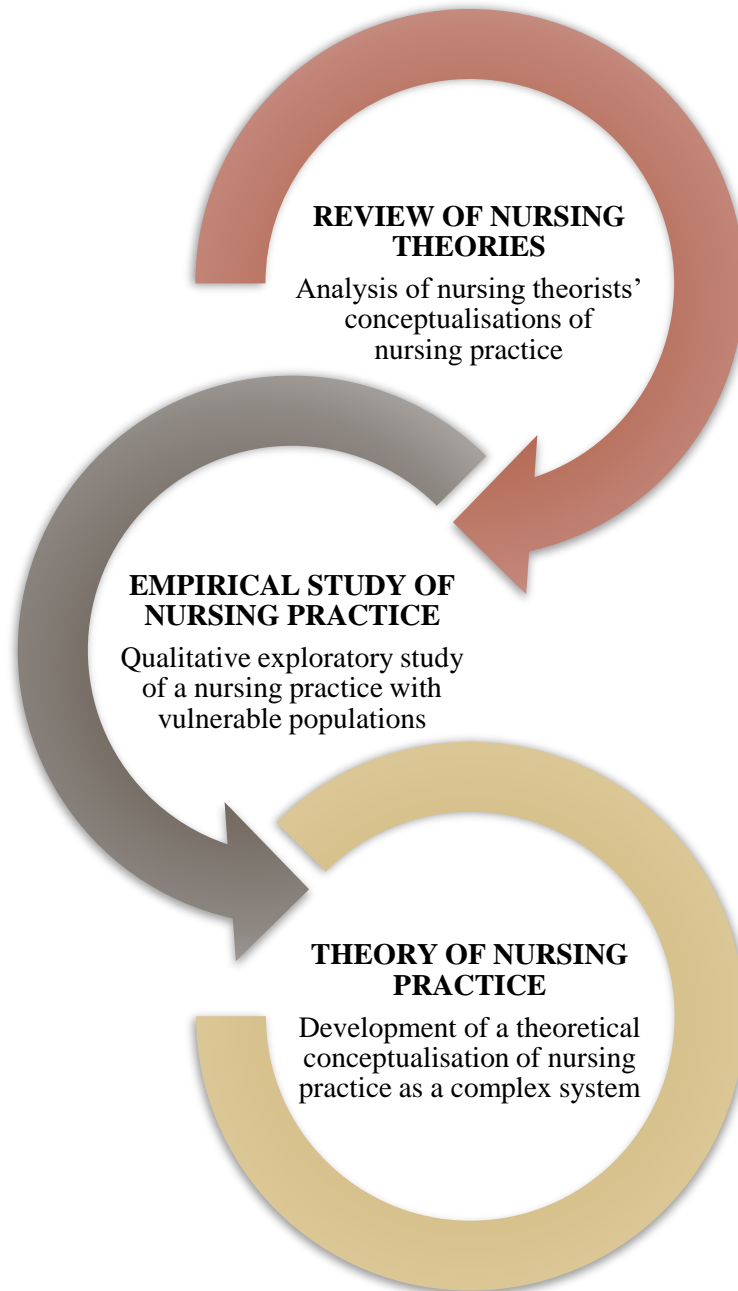
# Objective

- To present a theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice as a complex system.

## **Particular focus on:**

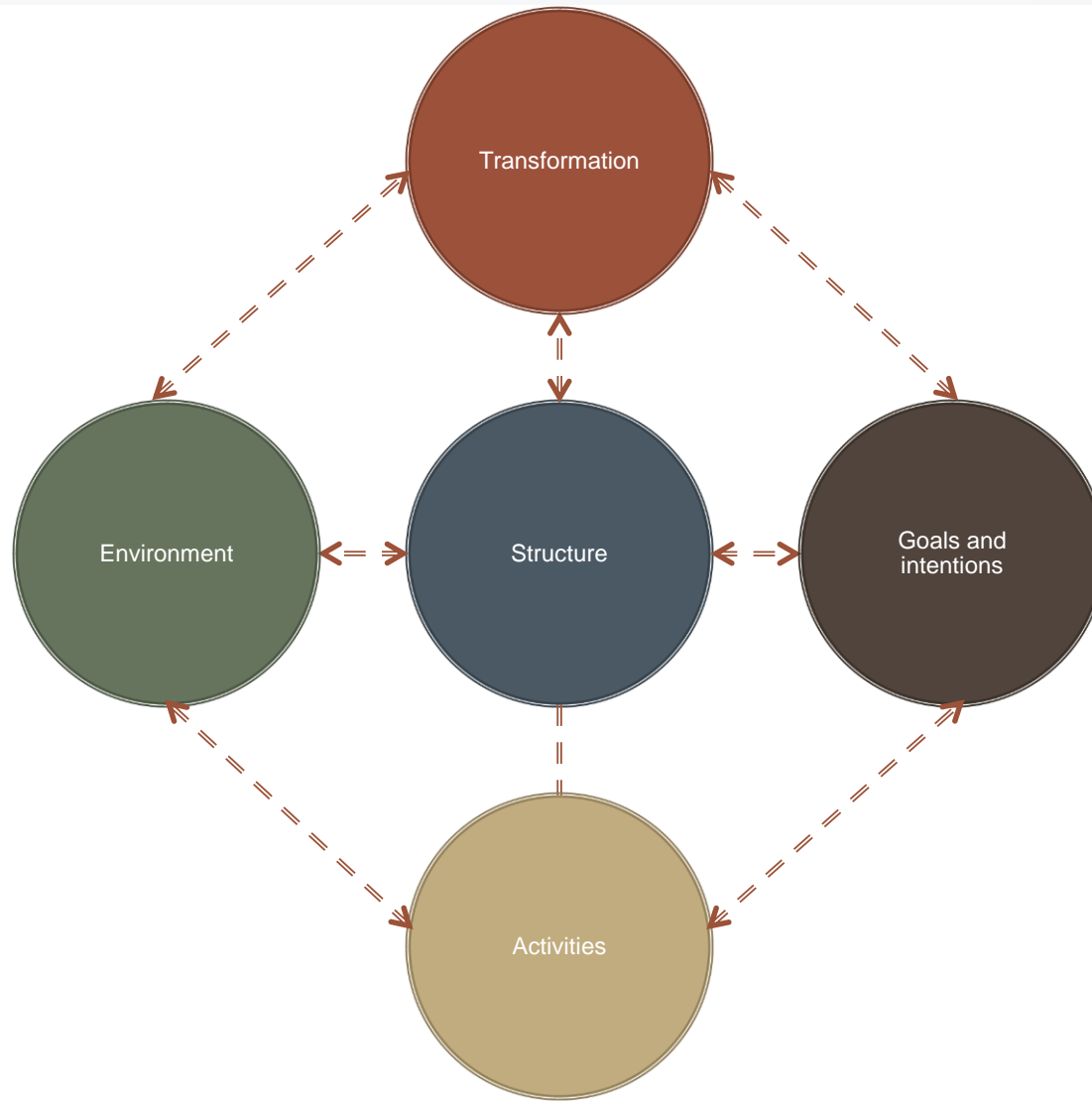
- Methodological process for the development of a model;
- Value of a complexity lens to conceptualise nursing practice;
- Issues to consider in contemporary conceptualisations of nursing practice.

# METHODS



# Complex systems lens

(a general systems theory)



# Review of nursing theories

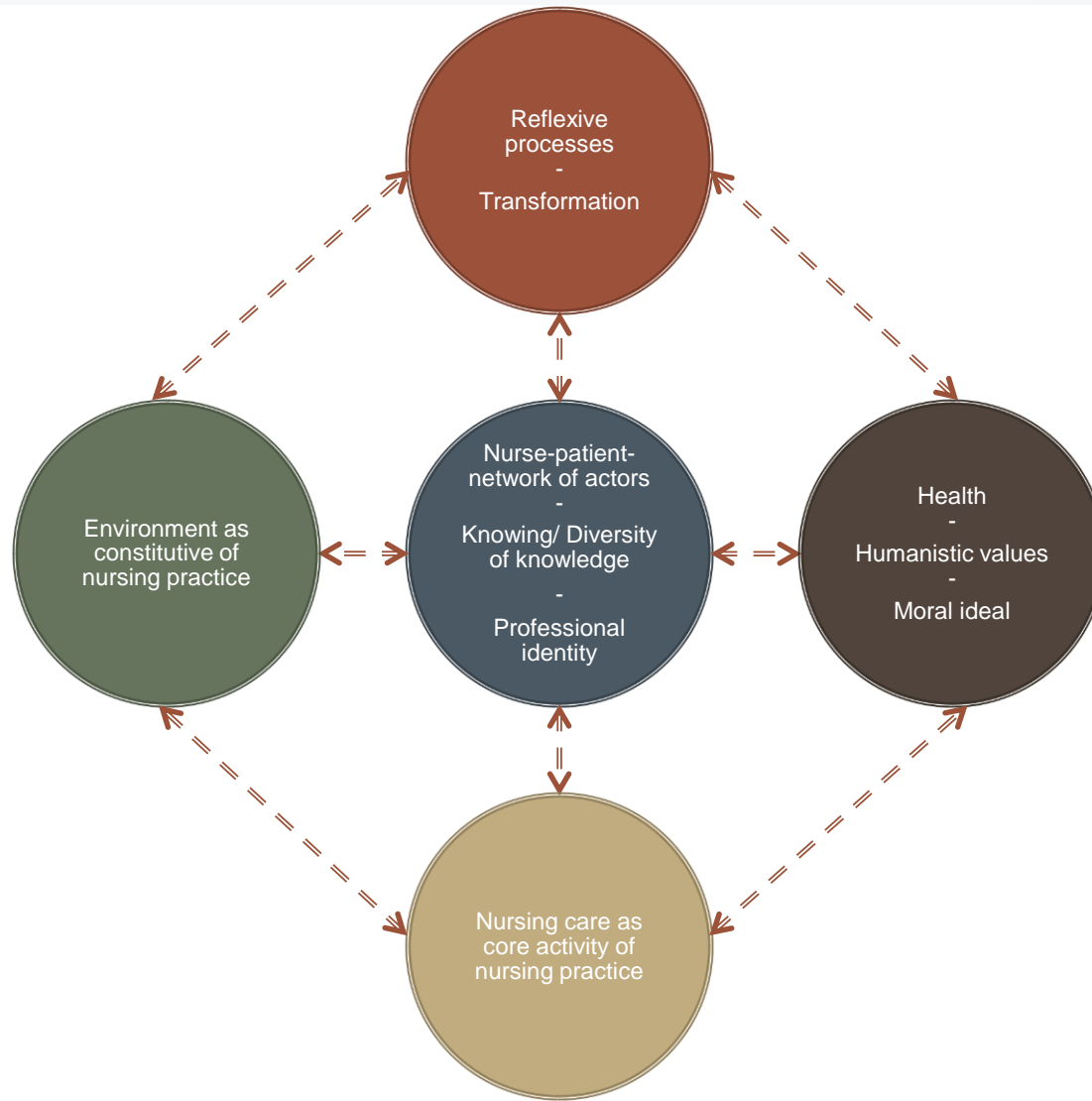
- Analysis of nursing theorists' conceptualisations of nursing practice (Richard, Gendron and Cara, 2012)
- Literature search
  - CINAHL, Medline, Pubmed
  - 1960-2011
  - Keywords: nursing practice, nursing theory, nursing discipline, praxis, caring.
  - Inclusion criteria: theoretical and conceptual articles presenting a clear definition of nursing practice, a conceptualisation of nursing practice or key components of nursing practice.
  - **125 articles** examined; data extracted for thematic analysis.



# Results from the review

- ① **Nursing care** as one of several components of nursing practice;
- ② A **network of actors and diverse ways of knowing and knowledge** structure nursing practice;
- ③ **Values, goals and intentions** drive nursing practice;
- ④ The **environment** is constitutive of nursing practice organisation, activity and transformation;
- ⑤ The **transformation** of nursing practice is an interconnection of reflexive processes.

# Conceptual framework guiding empirical study



# Empirical study of nursing practice with vulnerable populations

⇒ **STUDY OUTLINE**

## Study design

A qualitative exploratory study of a nursing practice with vulnerable populations was carried out in three primary healthcare organisations in the province of Quebec, Canada.

## Research aim and questions

Aim: to develop a model of nursing practice with vulnerable populations

Questions:

- What activities or processes do nurses use in their interface nursing practice?
- With whom do nurses interact/intervene in their interface nursing practice?
- What projects, intentions and ideals are nurses inspired by in their interface nursing practice?
- In what context does interface nursing practice develop?
- How did interface nursing practice evolve over time?

**Aim situated within a systemic perspective.**

**Questions related to each dimension of the conceptual framework.**

## Methods

15 semi-structured interviews with primary care nurses (90 min.)

**A combination of methods and sources of data to investigate nursing practice from different angles.**

- Interview topics: nursing interventions or activities; actors with whom nurses intervene/interact; context of the interface nursing practice; constraints and success strategies of interface nursing practice
- Interview syntheses were sent to participants for feedback and validation

Self-administered sociodemographic questionnaire

Aim: to produce professional and training portrayals of nurses who participated in semi-structured interviews

1 year of participant observation (50 hours)

Aim: to produce in-depth descriptions of interface nursing practice activities and contexts

- Observation of the interface practice of 2 nurses
- Observation during team meetings
- Informal interviews with administrators, interprofessional teams and community actors

Document analysis

Aim: to describe historical, organizational and political trends and contexts relating to the development of interface nursing practice

## Data analysis

Thematic analysis initiated during data collection;

Systemic model developed iteratively throughout the interpretive process of qualitative analysis using Le Moigne's systemic lens.

# Results from empirical study

- Qualitative analyses revealed 4 themes:
  - ① nursing as **strategic action**;
  - ② **relational processes** as core to nursing practice within a broad social network;
  - ③ **autonomy as a social obligation** for vulnerable populations;
  - ④ **reconfiguration of professional identity** through contradictory processes.

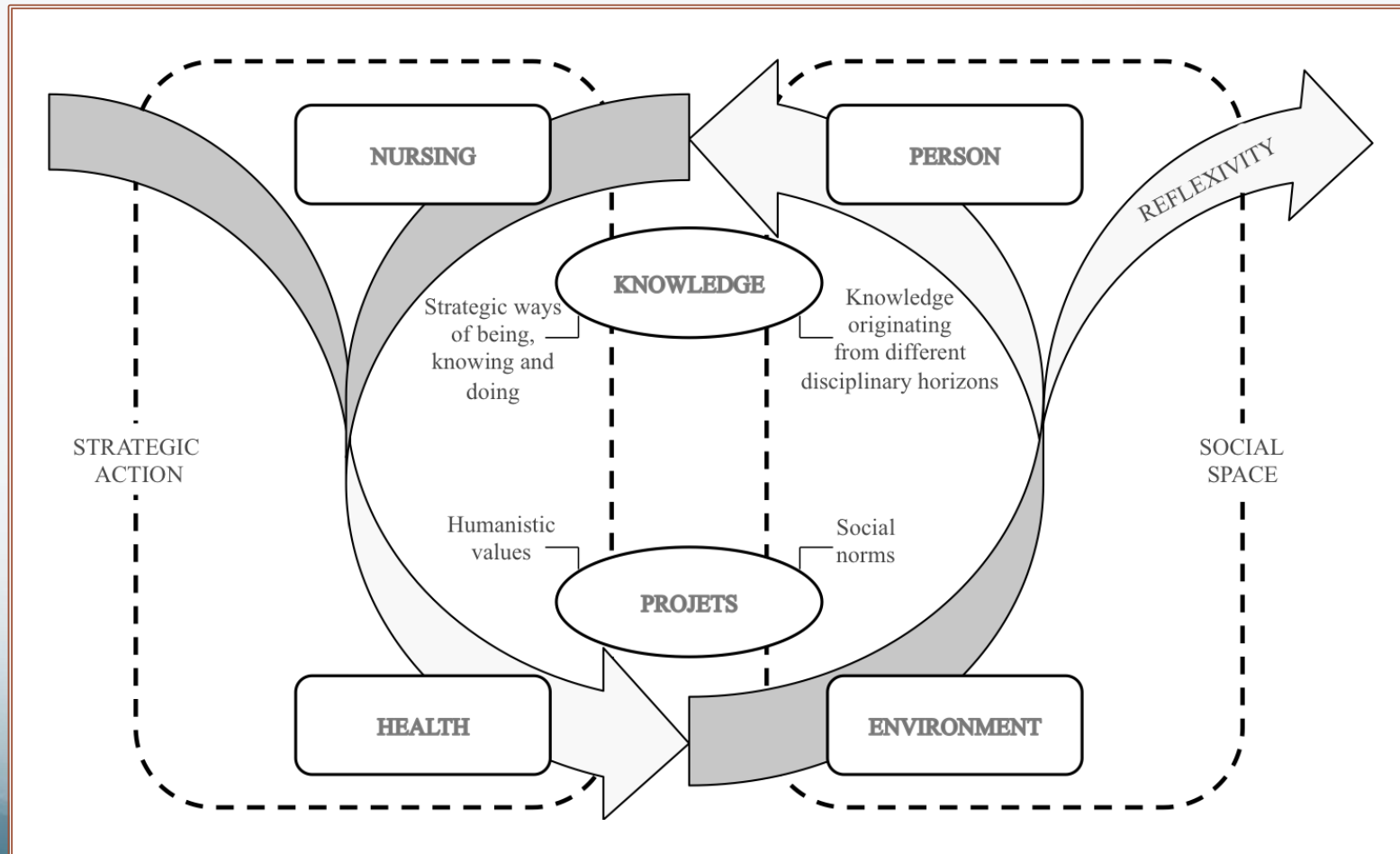
# Theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice

- Time intensive reflective writing and schematisation at the intersection of empirical findings and social theory;
- **Key questions**
  - How do our empirical results relate to the nursing metaparadigm and our initial conceptualisation of nursing practice?
  - What significant concepts or interconnections between conceptual dimensions of nursing practice emerge?
  - How could we meaningfully represent nursing practice as an articulation of our core concepts?

# Theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice

- Nursing practice as a complex system emphasising 4 core processes:
  - ① nursing practice is **reflexive** – it changes and generates change;
  - ② nursing practice is **strategic** – driven by nurses' vision, goals and interests;
  - ③ nursing practice is **informed by humanistic values, social norms and a diversity of disciplinary (social-health) knowledge**;
  - ④ nursing practice is **structured by a social environment combining a network of actors, resources, knowledge and values** in interaction.

# Theoretical conceptualisation of nursing practice





# Conclusions

- Contemporary conceptualisations of nursing practice should include:
  - nurses as strategic actors;
  - environment as constitutive of nursing practice;
  - reflexive processes as transformational praxis;
  - social theory to foster critical thinking.
- The value of complex systems thinking:
  - Critical reflection on nursing practice to bridge the theory – practice gap;
  - Dialogical thinking with other disciplines to address challenges in health and transformation of professional practice.

# Conclusions

- Future work should further examine and critically reflect on:
  - the concept of **health** within a social environment;
  - the concept of **person** within a social network and social space;
  - the intersection of **humanistic values** of nursing practice with **strategic action** and **(powerful) social norms**.
- Theory of nursing practice should rely on rigorous empirical research and collaborative processes with nurses, as well as a diversity of sources of knowledge from various disciplines to capture the complexity of nursing practice in a world of perpetual change.

# Thank you

Questions and comments  
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