This philosophical inquiry uses critical social theory and feminist perspectives to examine the relationship between nursing and the concept of social capital, and to consider implications for nursing practice, research, education and public policy. The study uses 'writing' as the method of inquiry and analysed over 450 documents as data. Nursing is discursively positioned within various ideological discourses that structure ethical frameworks shaping the nursing identity, the enactment of moral nursing care in the public social sphere the evaluation of practice and legitimise forms of trust and knowledge. These ideologies include neoliberalism and scientific objectivism.

Historical discourses in social capital are reviewed to establish the context to this study. 'Capital' is an asset, wealth or a resource. The markers of social capital are both the capacity to cooperate for mutual benefit which builds social cohesion, and norms of trust, reciprocity and resilience to accommodate conflict, diversity and change, thus moving beyond individual interests to work for the common good. Without trust cooperation is unattainable, and without cooperation, civil society cannot be realised. Current theorising and research into the utilisation and measurement of social capital using Social and Ethical Accounting and Reporting (SEAR) is also examined. SEAR is a form of social evaluation research used to identify what type of social actions and social processes create and sustain problem solving and inclusiveness between individuals in organisations or other forms of collectivity. SEAR is based on indicators and measurements of social capital.

Studies indicates that high levels of social capital correlate with high levels of trust, decreased morbidity, low levels of health and socio-economic inequalities, and building a sustainable civil society. Social capital as social cohesion is a socio-economic determinant of health in primary health care. This evidence is significant to nursing because it links with practice in health promotion, cooperation, collaboration and values of salutogenesis.

This thesis calls for the re-defining of progress beyond profit in the nursing workplace and the re-valuing of trust and social values as core values, thus challenging the dominant focus of building economic capital. SEAR research in the nursing workplace is a way of making visible nurses' work, the qualities of social linkages, and explaining the informal links in the nursing workplace that are often ignored in current market based, institutional analyses. Nursing could indeed benefit from the development of other measures of evaluating practice, trust, social process and effectiveness. Further nursing research is indicated with the explicit purpose of developing ethical markers and indicators of progress through the exploration of what constitutes an ethical and effective health care organisation, beyond the current economic outcome-based markers of success. Social capital can act as a conduit for nursing education and practice to link with interdisciplinary theorising in areas of public health, sustainable development, and building ethical and healthy workplaces.

Nursing leadership is crucial in social and political activism to develop sustainable, upstream public health policies and services for the common good. Further inquiry is indicated to craft bridging social capital and virtuous circles in order to strengthen the nursing workplace and the civic space between community, state and market, thus striving toward sustainable peace based on economic and social justice for all, without distinction of gender, race, class or creed.