
**Together in the Darkest Times: Social Support Theory in Kristin Hannah's
The Nightingale**

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Abstract:

This research examines the portrayal of social support theory in Kristin Hannah's historical fiction novel, *The Nightingale*. Set in France during World War II, the novel explores the complex relationships between sisters Vianne and Isabelle, and their struggles to survive and resist the Nazi occupation. Through a critical lens, this analysis applies James S. House's social support theory to demonstrate how the novel highlights the crucial role of emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support in promoting resilience and well-being in the face of trauma and adversity. The project is structured into three chapters: 'Introduction', 'Social Support Theory in *The Nightingale*' and 'Summing Up', which follow the guidelines of the latest *MLA Handbook*.

Keywords: World War II, Resilience, Social Support Theory and *The Nightingale*

Introduction

The Social Support Theory as proposed by James S. House defines social support as perception and actuality that one is cared for, has assistance available from other people, and that one is part of a supportive social network. Emphasizes the importance of social relationships and support networks in maintaining physical and mental health. Social support can enhance an individual's ability to cope with adversity and bounce back from challenging situations. Components of social support theory are Emotional Support, Instrumental Support, Information Support and Appraisal Support.

In the context of Kristin Hannah's novel, *The Nightingale*, this Social Support Theory can apply to the experience of the two main characters, Vianne and Isabelle. They both face numerous challenges and traumatic events, including the loss of loved ones, poverty, and the brutality of war. Vianne and Isabelle's relationships with each other and with other characters serve as a source of social support.

Emotional Support

The Nightingale demonstrates that Emotional Support can strengthen relationships and foster a sense of community. The characters who provide and receive emotional support form strong bonds that help them cope with the challenges of war. The complex dynamics of emotional support within relationships, particularly in difficult times. Vianne is receiving emotional support in the form of care and protection from Julien who is trying to show love. “He is trying to take care of me, to show how much he loves me in this most difficult of times, and so I put up with his controlling ways” (Hannah 2).

Antoine provides emotional support that lingers beyond the farewell. It becomes a lasting memory that will comfort her in the future, reminding her of the love and connection they shared. In this moment, Jasmine becomes a source of emotional grounding, possibly soothing her as she faces the pain of parting. Even though they are parting, the memory of this embrace and the scent will stay with her, offering a form of emotional connection even in absence. This highlights how emotional support isn’t just about words it’s also found in touch, scent, and the memories we carry forward. “Antoine took her in his arms. The scent of jasmine was intoxicating, and she knew suddenly, certainly, that from now on, whenever she smelled jasmine, she would remember this good-bye” (Hannah 13).

According to Hornby (1995), the struggle is defined as trying very hard to do or achieve something difficult. The tears signify that even those striving to be strong require compassion and understanding, highlighting the power of shared vulnerability in fostering meaningful emotional connections. “She wanted to be the strong one for once but she couldn’t stop the tears that filled her eyes” (Hannah 111).

His tears and heartfelt words express the deep emotional bond between them and his fear of separation. This moment highlights the child’s reliance on his mother for comfort, safety, and love. It is a reminder that even in the darkest times, the warmth of familial love and the assurance of a caring presence can offer solace, strength, and the courage to face an uncertain future. The line conveys the power of familial connection as a source of emotional support, while also emphasizing the difficulty of maintaining that connection during moments of forced separation or hardship. “Tears filled his eyes. But you’re my maman. I don’t want to go” (Hannah 417).

Kristin Hannah’s *The Nightingale* provides a compelling and emotional demonstration of James S. House’s social support theory. Kristin Hannah portrays emotional support as a multifaceted force that stems from human connection, acts of kindness, inner strength, and the enduring power of hope. She shows how even in the midst of war’s devastation, emotional support can be a lifeline.

Instrumental Support

Instrumental support refers to tangible assistance, such as financial help, practical aid, or physical assistance. The novel demonstrates how these acts of tangible aid, both large and small, contribute to individual resilience, community survival, and the larger resistance effort against the Nazi occupation. The act of withdrawing the money and leaving it for

Vianne ensures she has the financial resources needed to survive and manage during a time of war. This scene highlights how instrumental support, in the form of tangible resources, can be crucial for survival and resilience during times of crisis. It's a reminder that sometimes, the most powerful form of help is the provision of practical means to overcome adversity. "I took all of our money out of the bank. There are sixty-five thousand francs in the mattress. Use it wisely, Vianne" (Hannah 16).

Instrumental support is evident by Isabelle, she gathers essential survival items, preserved food, blankets, medical supplies, a shotgun, and wine and organizes them. This act demonstrates practical assistance, either for herself or others, ensuring preparedness and security during a difficult time. It highlights how instrumental support can be provided through physical resources to aid survival and comfort in challenging circumstances. "She tucked the trunk into the back corner and then went back to the house, where she gathered up some preserved food, blankets, some medical supplies, her father's hunting shotgun, and a bottle of wine, all of which she put out on the shelves" (Hannah 70).

According to Keegan (1989), couriers played a pivotal role in sustaining resistance efforts, particularly in occupied territories where traditional means of communication were compromised. This shows that instrumental support in these times required people to make large sacrifices. "She was a courier, not a frightened schoolgirl. What risk there was she accepted" (Hannah 159).

The child In Vianne's care needs baptismal and identity papers, likely to hide their true background and avoid Nazi persecution. Without these documents, the child would be at extreme risk. Even though Vianne is unsure how to obtain the papers, she commits to finding them, demonstrating how instrumental support often requires courage and resourcefulness. Her decision highlights the selflessness and bravery needed to protect the vulnerable during wartime. "Child in our care needs papers. Baptismal certificates- I can... get those, of course, but identity paper... "I will get them," Vianne said, although she had no idea if it was possible" (Hannah 327).

The Nightingale demonstrates how instrumental support becomes a critical survival mechanism in times of crisis. The character's actions align with House's definition by: addressing immediate needs, providing practical assistance and demonstrating a commitment to the well-being of others.

Informational Support

The Information support in *The Nightingale* provides access to relevant information, the characters are better able to cope with the challenges of living in a war zone. The power of communication in the face of oppression. Informational support in *The Nightingale* is not just about sharing facts; it's about providing hope, empowering resistance, and ensuring survival in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Antoine raises awareness of the escalating danger and to prepare people for the inevitable. It is a way of spreading knowledge, so that people can prepare. Informational support involves sharing knowledge or insights that helps Vianne to prepare for or cope with

a situation. In this case, the speaker is warning others of the inevitability of being drawn into the war, helping them to understand the gravity of the situation and potentially encouraging them to prepare for the challenges ahead. “Hitler will suck us all into his war soon” (Hannah 8).

Edith Cavell was a British nurse during World War I who was executed by the Germans for helping Allied soldiers escape from occupied Belgium. By mentioning Cavell, Hannah provides the reader with a concrete example of bravery and sacrifice, which informs the reader about the character’s desire to take action and fight for a cause, just as Cavell did. This reference to a well-known historical figure helps to emphasize the character’s commitment to resistance and the personal courage required during wartime. “I want to stay and fight, Papa. To be like Edith Cavell” (Hannah 33).

It informs the reader that the characters are preparing to engage in the conflict, marking a pivotal moment in the story where they transition from passive witnesses to active participants in the war. It is a sharing of information about future plans. “We will be off to join the war” (Hannah 41). Bartov (1992) explains that this transformation was particularly evident in the German Wehrmacht during World War II, where soldiers had to quickly abandon their civilian mentalities and adopt the ideological and operational expectations of the military.

Kristin Hannah’s *The Nightingale* powerfully illustrates the critical role of informational support within the broader framework of social support, particularly during the harrowing context of World War II in occupied France. Hannah also portrays the dangers of misinformation and propaganda, which the Germans used to control the population. The exchange of information within the Resistance, and the sharing of survival strategies among civilians, highlights the importance of knowledge in navigating danger.

Appraisal Support

The Appraisal Support in *The Nightingale* plays a crucial role in helping the characters develop confidence, self-awareness, and motivation, ultimately enabling them to survive and resist in the face of overwhelming adversity. It involves giving feedback and affirmation that validates a person’s actions, worth, and competence. In essence, it’s about making someone feel valued and capable.

Isabella silenced the men who started to thank her. Henri acknowledges and respects her contributions without allowing excessive attention. This reflects an understanding of her courage and actions, showing support by valuing what she has done without pressuring her for recognition. Appraisal support here is about quietly validating her efforts, allowing her dignity and strength. “The men started to thank her, Henri silenced them” (Hannah 100). Honoring the sacrifices of those who served is essential in preserving their legacy and ensuring their contributions are not forgotten (Winter 125). This act of honouring and valuing another person’s actions reinforces their worth and significance, highlighting the importance of validating and celebrating the contributions of loved ones as a form of emotional and

appraisal support. “I do my best to be my sister’s ambassador, collecting the thanks she deserves” (Hannah 435).

Conclusion

Kristin Hannah’s *The Nightingale* provides a powerful and moving illustration of James S. House’s social support theory, particularly concerning appraisal support. Through her character’s experiences, she demonstrates how vital it is to validate, affirm, and recognize the worth of individuals, especially during times of extreme stress. The novel shows that small acts of appreciation, and validation, can have a huge impact on a person ability to survive. James House’s Social Support Theory is deeply embedded in *The Nightingale*, illustrating that survival, resistance, and resilience depend on social support systems. The novel showcases the four key types of support instrumental, emotional, informational, and appraisal demonstrating how each form of aid plays a crucial role in protecting lives, fighting oppression, and maintaining hope. The novel highlights the importance of social support in promoting resilience, coping, and survival. It also shows that social support can be provided in diverse ways, from small acts of kindness to large-scale resistance efforts. Hannah demonstrates how social support enables characters to endure unimaginable hardships. The strength they derive from their connections helps them persevere in the face of fear and loss. Ultimately, *The Nightingale* affirms that acts of kindness, courage, and solidarity no matter how small can change lives in times of darkness, making social support the foundation of survival and resistance during war.

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