A Conceptual Framework of Nursing in Native American Culture

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Purpose: To depict the phenomenon of nursing in the Native American culture.
Design: At the 1997 annual Native American Nursing Summit held on the Flathead Reservation in Montana, 203 Native American nurses, nursing students, and others who provide health care to Native American people attended and participated in focus groups that provided the data for this qualitative study. The participants represented many tribes from across the United States. Follow-up in 1998 included a similar group of 192 participants.
Methods: Native American nurses facilitated focus groups. The facilitators provided direction for the focus groups and supervised the data collection. Native American nurses with advanced degrees in nursing performed the data analysis utilizing theme, taxonomic, and componential analysis methods.
Findings: Seven dimensions were identified in the data: (a) caring, (b) traditions, (c) respect, (d) connection, (e) holism, (f) trust, and (g) spirituality. Each dimension is essential to the practice of nursing in Native American culture. Together they provide the basis for a systematic approach to Native American nursing practice, education, research, and administration.
Conclusions: The conceptual framework of nursing in the Native American culture, with its seven dimensions, shares dimensions with mainstream nursing, yet it differs in many important ways. This model can be used by Native American nurses to provide a structure for engaging in the profession of nursing. Further, it can be used by nurses of other cultures to understand nursing in the Native American culture and to provide health care to Native American people.

Native American, American Indian, and Alaska Native are terms used to identify the indigenous peoples of the United States. The 2000 U.S. census indicates an estimated 2,448,000 Native American people, who comprise 0.99% of the U.S. population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Native American people are widely dispersed geographically. In recent times, the Native American population has increasingly relocated to urban areas. Yet many still reside on rural reservations (Young, 1994). The Native American population consists of over 500 federally recognized tribes, each having its own culture, life way, traditions, and beliefs, with widely varying degrees of acculturation. Each tribe is distinct. Many similarities exist too; and a cultural bond exists among these different groups.
Within every society and culture, a health culture exists and is used to define the phenomena associated with health, wellness, illness, and death. Members of different cultures draw upon their own particular health world view in situations of health and illness (Reynolds Turton, 1997). Native American nurses, too, perceive life through a distinct lens and they use their health world view to help them make sense of health matters. They thus encounter, experience, and perform the art and science of the nursing profession differently from nurses of other cultures (Struthers & Littlejohn, 1999).

This study was done to depict the nature of nursing in Native American culture. “What is the essence of Native American nursing?” was the research question. A conceptual framework of nursing in Native American culture was developed from the findings of this study, resulting in a diagrammatic model of the conceptual framework for the phenomenon of nursing in Native American culture.

Methods

Data for this qualitative study were collected during the 1997 and 1998 annual national Native American nursing summits hosted by Salish-Kootenai Tribal College on the Flathead Reservation in Montana. The summit is a gathering of Alaska Native and Native American nurses, nursing students, and other nurses who provide health care to Native American people. Participants represented 39 tribes from across the continental United States and Alaska.

The idea of exploring the nature and essence of Native American nursing arose among Native American nurses during the 1997 summit planning sessions. The National Alaska Native American Indian Nurses Association (NANAINA), an organization that supports professional needs of Alaska Native and American Indian nurses and works to maintain and improve health care to Alaska Native and American Indian communities, provided guidance and was closely involved in the summit.

The process of collecting the 1997 and 1998 summit data was the same in both years. In each year, participants were: (a) assigned to focus groups, (b) informed of the focus group task, and (c) advised that the data would be used for research and dissemination purposes. Each focus group was facilitated by a Native American nurse who was provided with specific instructions related to the focus-group purpose, instructed on how to collect the data, and advised to record the data on flipcharts.

At the 1997 summit, 203 participants formed 11 focus groups, and data were gathered to define the nature of Native American nursing. Theme analysis (Spradley, 1980) was used to identify themes from the data by National Alaska Native American Indian Nurses Association (NANAINA) members. Focus-group participants then provided validation of these themes during a plenary forum.

In 1998, 192 participants formed seven focus groups to explore deeper meanings and further delineate the themes of Native American nursing. Theme, taxonomic, and componential analysis (Spradley, 1980) resulted in a conceptual framework that is comprised of dimensions, characteristics, and components that depict the nature and spirit of nursing in the Native American culture.

Findings

Seven themes were identified in the 1997 data that describe the core principles of Native American nursing (Struthers & Littlejohn 1999). The 1998 data further delineated these themes and resulted in the development of a conceptual framework comprised of the following dimensions: (a) caring, (b) traditions, (c) respect, (d) connection, (e) holism, (f) trust, and (g) spirituality.

Native Americans have a holistic world view that they live and experience in a circular manner (Struthers, 1999). Nurses in the Native American culture also show these traits with their intertwined, related, and overlapping components. The dimensions and their characteristics are categorized and

Figure 1. Dimensions of nursing in Native American culture.
illustrated in Figure 1. The central symbol in Figure 1 portrays a sunrise which illustrates a new beginning in Native American culture.

Caring

The dimension of caring embodies characteristics of health, relationships, holism, and knowledge. The components of the characteristic of health include humor, forming partnerships, fearlessness, dignity, passion, and sensitivity. A participant described health in this way: “Caring means partnership in healing.” Summit participants described components of the characteristic of relationship as being nonjudgmental, using presence, exchange, unconditionality, trust, partnership, nurturing, connecting, and love. “Nursing and caring is a calling.” Holism, another characteristic of the dimension of caring, contains the components of healing the body, mind, and spirit. Expressions for this component include, “You heal parts of self with healing of others;” “Use every opportunity to heal self;” and “Caring goes beyond the physical into the spirit world.” The characteristic of knowledge includes the components of listening, validating self and others, instinctiveness, and reflecting. “Knowing where you, and they (clients), are coming from,” was among participant responses illuminating the characteristic of knowledge.

Traditions

The dimension of traditions contains four characteristics: relationship, respect, wisdom, and values. Components of the characteristic relationship consist of acknowledging family, community, and tribe, and communing. “Connection of heritage helps in the nursing process.”

The characteristic of respect includes the components of elders, acceptance, privacy, and sensitivity. “Caring for our elders is in our tradition.” Wisdom encompasses strength, knowledge, learning and discovery, and exploring. “Being culturally competent is important and one never stops learning,” and “Knowing the past, to call upon that wisdom and strength” were participants’ declarations describing wisdom. The characteristic of values includes the components of Indian medicine, old ways, ceremonies, and rituals. One participant referred to values in Native American nursing in this way: “The cultural, traditional approach is the art of nursing, not the science of nursing.” Another affirmed that values include the “Use of ceremonies, sweats to cleanse the body, and sage, sweet grass, roots, bark, and teas are used as Indian medicine along with conventional medicine.”

Respect

The dimension of respect includes characteristics of relationship, honor, identity, and strength. The characteristic of relationship refers to components of presence and compassion. “Nursing is compassion and respect” is an account by a participant that reflects relationship. Honor entails elders and stories and is exemplified in participant statements that “respect is never talking down,” and “Respect their stories.” Identity is a characteristic that is linked to the components of awareness, acknowledgment, and defining. “Awareness of what or who Native Americans are” is a participant’s referral to identity. The characteristic of strength includes the components of learning, listening, trusting, and understanding. Examples of participant descriptions of strength included “acknowledging wisdom,” “seeking to understand,” “willingness to learn,” “willing to listen,” and “willingness to trust.”

Connection

The dimension of connection contains the characteristics of relationships and foundation. The characteristic of relationship consists of the components of honoring all people, the past, the present, the future, harmony with nature, honoring the nursing profession, sharing and anticipating, and exploring similarities and differences. Participants described the characteristic of relationship as “We acknowledge and connect with each other.” The characteristic of foundation comprises action components such as building, healing, taking risks, creating togetherness, cohesiveness, unfolding, interrelating with all, weaving, and transforming. “As Native American nurses, we need to know where clients come from, where clients are at, and where clients are going.” Other participants described foundation as “being a bridge,” “putting puzzles back together,” and “putting the pieces of the quilt together.”

Holism

The dimension of holism includes the components of balance, culture, and relationship. Silence, male, female, noncompartmentalization, flowing with harmony, and pursuing peace are components of the characteristic of balance. Statements by participants such as “We see the whole, and clients can pick up on this;” “Synergy helps with the holistic approach;” and “Native American nurses are not always engaged in activity as silence is a treatment;” illustrate the components of the characteristic of balance.

Spirituality, beliefs, and healing are components of the characteristic of culture. One participant said, “Native American nursing is more holistic. It is spiritual, emotional, and physical.” Components of the characteristic of relationship are interacting nonverbally, honor, being nonjudgmental, a common language, trust, and family and community. Statements by participants describing the holistic relationship included “seeing the whole,” and “You must be whole within yourself to pass this on to the patients.” Further, “Native American nurses speak the same language, either Native language or language of like-type experiences. This language connectedness yields holistic care.”

Trust

Relationship, presence, and respect are characteristics of trust. Relationship pertains to responsibility to self and others. Native American nursing has a “responsibility to build a relationship with the patient.” Participants described the characteristic of presence as sharing and breaking barriers. “Clients,” a participant said, “open up to me as a nurse and
trust me with themselves.” The characteristic of respect was described as confidentiality and integrity. A participant described integrity as “knowing the difference between doing things right and doing the right thing.”

**Spirituality**

The dimension of spirituality includes the five characteristics of relationship, unity, honor, balance, and healing. “Indians emphasize spirituality in their nursing practice,” a participant said. Components of the characteristic of relationship include touching, learning, and utilizing traditions. “The art of touching someone has spiritual power.” Transcending boundaries and pursuing oneness are components of the characteristic of unity. Participants described these components as: “There are no boundaries,” and “A transcending recognition of unity and oneness exists.” The characteristic of honor includes the components of appreciation and respect: “It is an honor to be present at birth and at death.” Components of the characteristic of balance involve destiny and “centering yourself with Mother Earth and care for self.” The characteristics of healing include gifting, praying, and resonating with the “Great Mystery.” Participants noted that Native American nurses are comfortable “with paradox and the role of destiny in their lives,” and their “relationship with the Great Mystery.”

**The model of the conceptual framework**

The model of the conceptual framework (Figure 2) is formed in a circle, indicating the circular holistic world view of Native American culture. This roundness depicts the interrelatedness, intertwining, and interlacing of all seven dimensions of the phenomenon of nursing in the Native American culture. The model is intertribal and exemplifies indigenous oneness; it includes beliefs, values, and customs of many U.S. tribes.

According to one Native American nurse, the medicine wheel signifies the circle of life, the inner spirit (personal communication, Gloria Davis, June 21, 2000). The medicine wheel, a magic circle that encompasses the Native world (Sun Bear & Wabun, 1992) and reveals the “Way of Life” of indigenous people (Cianci & Nadon, 1986), lies at the center of the model. The four directions, East, South, West and North, are meaningful in describing the medicine wheel. Each direction represents one of the four elements of fire, water, air, and Mother Earth (personal communication, Velma Orvis, April 1, 2000). The seven dimensions of the phenomenon of nursing in Native American culture are written in the feathers of the great thunderbird that wrap around the circle of the medicine wheel. Thus, the thunderbird, a sacred bird in Native American culture, is the frame for the circle.

**Discussion**

Conceptual frameworks are used to provide a structure to think about an abstract idea and to frame thought. According to Fawcett (1995), a conceptual framework or model of nursing is the “formal presentation of some nurses’ private images of nursing, and the use of a conceptual model facilitates communication among nurses and provides a systematic approach to nursing research, education, administration, and practice” (p.5). The conceptual framework of nursing in the Native American culture depicts dimensions, characteristics, and components that relate the essence of Native American nursing practice. This framework, developed from qualitative data, portrays the realities that lie at the heart of Native American nursing practice and guide the manner in which Native American nurses perform and deliver nursing care. Within the milieu of diversity, limited models and theories exist that are applicable to cross-cultural situations such as nursing in the Native American culture. This framework is meaningful to the profession of nursing because cultural competency and proficiency are necessary in a world of multiple world views (Leininger, 1995).

The dimensions, characteristics, and components of the phenomenon of nursing in Native American culture provide a culturally appropriate conceptual model. Many of the same dimensions exist in Native American nursing and in mainstream nursing. Nevertheless, Native American nurses often define their nursing practice differently from other nurses because they perceive life through a world view that is different and that guides them in making their own sense of the world and health matters.

The data analysis revealed caring as one of the seven dimensions. According to mainstream nursing, caring is defined by multiple attributes. Denman (1995) said caring occurs in that special moment between nurse and patient. However, the dimension of caring is further defined by Native American nurses as having the characteristics of health, relationships, holism, and knowledge.

The dimension of traditions is unique to Native American nursing. Worldwide, indigenous cultures are intertwined...
through native traditional practices such as rituals, ceremonies, and heritage. These traditions are vital to the continuation of a given native culture (Plumbo, 1995). The characteristics of the dimension of traditions in the conceptual framework of nursing in the Native American culture include relationship, respect, wisdom, and values.

Respect has been identified as pivotal in Native American life (Plumbo, 1995). The dimension of respect was also clearly defined as important and essential to Native American nursing and it includes the characteristics of relationship, honor, identity, and strength.

Nurses value connectedness, tying together relationship and responsibility (Geary & Hawkins, 1991). According to Schubert and Lionberger (1995), mutual connectedness is the joining of a nurse and client in a relationship committed to the health and healing of the client. Connection is a unique dimension in the conceptual framework of Native American nursing because it contains the characteristics of relationship and foundation. Components of the characteristic of relationships include honoring all people, honoring the nursing profession, experiencing the present, encountering the future. Harmonizing with nature, sharing and anticipating, and exploring similarities and differences were also identified as components of relationships.

Mainstream nurses have conceptualized holism as body, mind, and spirit viewed as a whole, with all components being interdependent (Larisey, 1990). The dimension of holism is entwined within Native American nurses’ world view and is distinct from mainstream nurses’ concept of holism in that it also contains the characteristics of balance, culture, and relationship. The components of the characteristic of balance, for example, are described as using silence, acknowledging the male and female, non-compartmentalizing, flowing with harmony, and pursuing peace.

The conceptual framework of nursing in the Native American culture also contains the dimension of spirituality. Spirituality is the most basic, yet least understood aspect of Native American nurses’ perspective. It is connected to who we are, our purpose in being, and our inner resources; and shapes our life journey” (Burkhardt & Nagai Jacobson, 2000, p. 91). Native American nurses view spirituality as an important dimension of nursing, including relationship, unity, honor, balance, and healing.

The conceptual framework of nursing in Native American culture was presented at the 10th annual American Indian Education Conference in March 2000, to clarify and further define this phenomenon. The audience consisted of 130 nurses and student nurses who provide nursing and health care to the Native American population. They took an interest in this project and made suggestions for future possibilities with the conceptual framework. They suggested a research study to determine if the dimensions, characteristics, and components are, in fact, what Native American nurses and their clients experience as part of the phenomenon of nursing in this selected culture.

**Conclusions**

This conceptual framework, based on the sacred medicine wheel, represents the “indigenous oneness” Native American nurses experience as they practice the phenomenon of nursing in their culture. Native American nurses of various tribes reside in different locations and provide nursing care in diverse geographic locations and settings, but the phenomena described in this study pertain across tribes and locations.

This framework can be utilized by Native American and Alaska Native nurses to provide a structure for engaging in nursing practice, education, research, and administration. Other health care providers as well can understand the cultural construct of nursing in Native American culture and utilize this model to provide health care to Native American clients, families, and communities. Nurses in other cultures can use this framework to help explore and define the nature of their own nursing practice.

**References**


