Ubuntu as an Instrument to Foster Holistic Nursing: The Views of South African Student Nurses

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Abstract

Introduction: Ubuntu is an African philosophy that reflects holistic and comprehensive care among people in the community. Holistic nursing is a philosophy of caring that focuses on holistic healing and humanism. The purpose of the study was to explore the views of the South African final-year student nurses on the ability of Ubuntu to foster holistic nursing. **Methods:** An exploratory descriptive qualitative method was used. Eight focus group interviews were conducted with final-year student nurses at selected universities. Colaizzi seven steps process of data analysis was utilized. **Results:** One of the themes that emerged was that Ubuntu can be an instrument to foster holistic nursing Ubuntu and holistic nursing share many common attributes, hence, the teaching and learning of Ubuntu could foster the type of caring embodied by holistic nursing. **Discussion:** Ubuntu represents an important care philosophy that can foster holistic nursing, especially when the inner driving force of the nurses is primarily to care for patients.

Introduction

Holistic nursing is based on the philosophy of holism and humanism and aims at caring for the person as a whole. Similarly, *Ubuntu* is a Nguni word, an African philosophy that generally means humanity and respectful treatment of others. *Ubuntu* is an African concept that provides an African angle to holistic care in the community. Ubuntu aims at integrating an individual, environment and the community together as a whole (Chuwa 2014). The Standards of Holistic Nursing Practice as developed by the American Holistic Nurses'

Association contains five core values, one of which addresses holistic ethics, theory, and research (American Holistic Nurses' Association, 1988). The holistic ethic focused on the professional ethics of caring, which include understanding and applying ethical principles in the holistic nursing practice (Frisch 2003). One of the nursing theories that support holistic nursing practice is Jean Watson's theory of human caring. Watson theory focuses on caring with the aim of promoting healing and respecting the wholeness and connection that exist among human beings (George 2011). The theory arises from her interest in giving meaning and dignity to the world of nursing and to provide nurses with a model with which nursing care can be delivered, with emphasis on caring for the purpose of healing (George 2011). The Jean Watson's theory is one of the caring theories taught in nursing educational programs to impart professional conducts towards holistic nursing practice.

The teaching and practice of caring that student-nurses learn during the nursing training are more likely to become an integral part of them (Loke et al 2015). This points to the potential impact the nursing training can have on the practice of holistic nursing by the student nurses at the end of their nursing education training. The holistic caring behaviours of nurses are molded right from the teaching and learning process, with the help of a curriculum that emphasizes the ethics and value of the holistic nursing practice.

Ubuntu on the other hand is not formally taught in nursing education, even in the African setting. Instead, it represents an African tradition passed from generation to generation, learned through social interaction among the community members (Mulaudzi et al., 2009). *Ubuntu* is a known indigenous African ethic, with respect for human life as one of its greatest values (Chuwa, 2014). The nature of *Ubuntu* is holism (Hanks, 2008). In the African context, a person is an embodiment of his biological, spiritual, psychological and environmental components (Chigangaidze et al. 2021). *Ubuntu*, like holistic nursing, entails respect for the totality of the human person while upholding the different components that make up

humanhood. *Ubuntu* is supposedly embraced as an intrinsic African moral philosophy that emphasizes caring relationship. The ethics of *Ubuntu* is based on communitarianism, which emphasizes how humanness can be carved out from positive relationships with other members of the society. The ethics of *Ubuntu* emphasizes human interrelatedness and togetherness that value respect, caring, compassion, kindness, warmth, understanding, sharing, humanness, reaching out, and an obligation to others (Mulaudzi et al., 2018).

Ubuntu with its focus on humanism can be a form of holistic care practice that can promote the provision of holistic nursing. Since *Ubuntu* is an element of caring in Africa, its ethics is therefore intricately linked and related to how holistic caring in nursing is viewed by people of African culture. In order to advance the practice of holistic nursing, the American Association of Holistic nursing identified community building in its mission (AHNA 2016). Similarly, community building in the form of solidarity is one of the greatest values upheld by *Ubuntu* (Muller, Smith and Lillah 2019). This warrant Ubuntu to be studied in the context of holistic nursing.

Across many countries, there have been complaints of a decline in the quality of care in nursing over time (You et al., 2013; Nesengani et al., 2019; Aiken et al., 2012). This is evident by several media reports portraying nurses rather than as caring and compassionate professionals but by the reported cases of hostility and inhumaneness with which patients in the care of nurses have been treated (Hoyle et al., 2017). Despite the apparent close-knitted interrelationship between holistic nursing and the African care concept of *Ubuntu*, literature is scarce on studies assessing how *Ubuntu*, as an innate drive to care for others present in a person of African descent, can be used to strengthen holistic nursing practice. The need for such studies aiming to gain insight on how to improve holistic nursing practice using *Ubuntu*, is vital, especially at a time like this when the decline in the quality of care in nursing has been acknowledged by both nurses and patients (Nesengani et al., 2019) as well as the

general public (Forte et al., 2019). At the time of conducting this study little is known about how *Ubuntu* can be used to foster holistic nursing practice, hence the exploration of the views of South African student nurses based on their experiences. The study sought to answer the question: How can *Ubuntu* be used to foster holistic nursing practice?

Methods

A qualitative exploratory descriptive design was used to seek the view of nursing-students on the use of *Ubuntu* as an instrument to foster holistic caring in nursing. This type of research design aims at exploring phenomena and to provide rich description of the participants' views for replication in future research (Reiter, 2017).

Ethical consideration

This research was approved by the human research ethics committee of the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Health Sciences with the approval number 451/2020. The researcher contacted the participants through email, informed them about the purpose of the study and obtained an online informed consent through Google form from each of them prior data collection. The research was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the three main ethical principles that guide qualitative research. The researchers ensured that participation in the study was voluntary and the participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point if they so will.

Research setting and participants

The study was conducted in the Gauteng province of South Africa, where *Ubuntu* is known to all as a quality of humanity. A total number of 49 final-year student nurses were recruited from two universities within Gauteng province, University A in Johannesburg and University B in Pretoria. Gauteng Province is one of the nine provinces in South Africa. It is a highly

cosmopolitan and the most populated province. This province was selected to have different views on the study phenomenon as a result of the diversity of the population of this province. Recruitment was by purposive sampling method from the selected universities, selecting participants that will most benefit the study. Students in their final year of study were invited for participation in the study based on their years of exposure to caring during clinical training and their perceived knowledge of *Ubuntu* as they have learnt in the community in which they live.

Data collection

The study used focus group interview as the method for data collection. In focus group interview, small homogenous group of people discuss and share experiences about a study phenomenon (Polit and Beck 2017). Data were collected through focus group interviews with open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted, and audio recorded via Zoom® or Google Meet®. The main interview questions were tested by the authors before the focus group interviews to ensure they the question address the main crux of the study (whiting, 2008). Prior to the focus group interviews, the researchers sent an information leaflet documents to the eligible participants. At the beginning of the interview which lasted 45-60minutes, the purposes of the study and the procedures to be followed were fully explained verbally, and each group participant signed an online Google consent form. During the focus group interviews, the participants were asked two primary questions:

1. What are the interconnectedness of *Ubuntu* and holistic nursing?

2. How can *Ubuntu* be used to foster holistic caring in nursing?

Probing questions were used to gain further clarifications on the participants' responses. The participants expressed their perceptions freely and the study data are presented in their words.

Data Analysis

The researchers utilized the Colaizzi's (1978) 7-step process for descriptive data analysis. The researchers read the transcripts, extracted all important statements, formulated meaning out of the contents, arranged the similar meaning into various clusters, identified themes that emerged from the clusters, integrated the result into exhaustive description of the phenomenon, and returned to participants for validation of finding. To establish integrity in a qualitative study, it is vital to employ rigor in the research design and methods for developing trustworthiness (Polit & Beck, 2017). The authors were thorough with the entire research process in a manner that ensures that the quality of the data collected was not compromised. Qualitative research is subjected to bias and wrong interpretation of findings (Polit & Beck, 2017). For objectivity, an independent coder, who has a good understanding of the research topic was involved throughout the process of data collection and data analysis. The researchers and the independent coder worked independently and provided an accurate context of the collected data. This was done to ensure that the researchers reflected the voice of the participants and not the perception of the researchers. The researchers provided detailed description of the research design and methods used, including methods of data collection and analysis. The contextual nature of the data will allow for easy applicability in other settings (Polit & Beck, 2017). A total of eight focus group interviews were conducted. Redundancy was achieved when no new information was obtained at the sixth focus group interview. The researchers conducted two more interviews to confirm that data saturation had been achieved. To ensure the accuracy of the data, each recorded interview was transcribed verbatim soon after each interview. The researchers documented each step of the transcription to provide evidence of trail audit. One study participant from each of the focus group volunteered to check the transcript and confirm that the transcript captured all that was discussed during the interview.

Triangulation was achieved using multiple perspectives. The researchers and the independent coder sorted out and extracted useful information from the data collected (Polit and Beck 2017). The themes derived from the data by the researchers were similar to that of the independent coder. The researchers and the independent coder compared the themes identified and both concluded on the final themes that best describe the perceptions of the participants.

Findings

The findings from the study represent the perceptions of the final-year student-nurses concerning the possibility of *Ubuntu* to be used as an instrument to foster holistic nursing. Three themes emerged from the responses of the participants.

1. *Ubuntu* and holistic caring in nursing share common values
2. *Ubuntu* can be taught and learned
3. *Ubuntu* may not be a sufficient drive for some nurses to provide holistic care

Theme 1. *Ubuntu* and holistic nursing share common values

Empathy and kindness were among the values mentioned by the study participants as nexuses that connect *Ubuntu* and holistic nursing. The participants stated that a nurse needs to be kind and empathetic in order to care for a patient holistically. This same kindness and empathy are concurrent with *Ubuntu,* an African concept that embodies caring for others.

"*Ubuntu basically is to be kind to people in whatever way you can, while caring in nursing gives opportunity for the nurse to be able to assist the sick in the hospital. So, the two concepts are talking about being selfless through assisting others*" (P2, FG4).

 "*In order to give care to patient, the nurse will have to look beyond the background, culture or beliefs of the care receiver. And Ubuntu teaches us to how to live and relate to people not*

considering our differences. So, I believe they both have things in common. Because if you

have Ubuntu, you will actually find it easy to nurse patient holistically as expected of a

professional nurse" (P5, FG6).

Theme 2: *Ubuntu* can be taught and learned

The majority of the participants indicated that based on the close knitted relationship between *Ubuntu* and holistic nursing, *Ubuntu* has the potential to be used for strengthening holistic caring in nursing. The participants reported that *Ubuntu* can be introduced into the nursing curriculum and taught like every other care concepts, and the professional nurses can also learn in practice.

"I think Ubuntu, as a way of caring that we all value while growing up, can be used to foster holistic caring in nursing, especially if Ubuntu is integrated into the profession and taught to students just like every other module" P4FG2.

The participants expressed the view that the humanity, respect, and kindness, which are virtues upheld by the philosophy of *Ubuntu* are some of the important teachings of caring in nursing.

"The kindness, humanity, respect we got from the culture of Ubuntu can be used to make caring in nursing to be a better one. This can happen if student-nurses are taught Ubuntu alongside the teaching of holistic caring in nursing" P1G6.

Theme 3: *Ubuntu* may not be a sufficient drive for some nurses to provide holistic care

Some of the final year student nurses opined that some people are attracted to the nursing profession due to the incentives attached to the profession and not for the altruistic reason of providing holistic care to patients in need. For this category of nurses, *Ubuntu* may not provide a sufficient drive for them to provide holistic care to patients.

"…..it is not all nurses that are in the profession because they want to care for people in need, some are there primarily because the job will fetch them money. So, these types of nurses won't even care about Ubuntu or no Ubuntu, they just care for patient anyhow and wait for pay day" P4FG8

"I don't agree that Ubuntu ethics can improve holistic care practice in nursing... I mean we are taught all we need to know about caring in school, and yet we have nurses with uncaring attitude. I believe it is just who they are, and nothing can make them better" P5FG4

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to describe the views of South African final year student nurses on how *Ubuntu* can be used to foster holistic nursing. The ethics of holistic nursing is a fundamental aspect of nursing which nurses must uphold when providing care to patients.

From the study findings, *Ubuntu* is perceived as a tool with the potential to strengthen holistic nursing, as its philosophy emphasises human caring. One of the findings was that *Ubuntu* and Holistic nursing share common values. The values of *Ubuntu* that are also core attributes of caring in nursing as indicated by the participants include empathy and kindness. Just as *Ubuntu* aims at ensuring harmonious human relationships through these values, the same is required of a nurse when caring for patients. *Ubuntu* is all about being selfless and the willingness to help when and where necessary, holistic ethics on the other hand entails actions purposely performed because of the willingness to promote unity (Burkhardt 2009). In the definition by Mariano (2007), holistic nursing is the application of practice that recognize the totality of the human being, the interrelatedness of body, mind, emotion, including social/cultural relationship. Similarly, Ubuntu recognizes the interconnectedness of the mind, body, and spirit, and the oneness of these parts constitute the wholeness of human which must be respected during interpersonal relationship among community members

(Mungai, 2015 as cited in Zvomuya, 2020). Therefore, *Ubuntu*, which is believed to be innate in human beings, has the potential to strengthen holistic care practice in nursing. This parallels the view of Mulaudzi, Masoga and Mogale (2018:245), who state that "nursing practice that is based on *Ubuntu* principles promotes collective wisdom and collective intelligence that is relational in nature". Manganyi (2016) also recognized the role *Ubuntu* can play in the teaching of nursing care during the training of nurses. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that *Ubuntu* is an important factor that can improve holistic nursing. The perceptions expressed by the participants of this study concur with the submissions of experts in the field of *Ubuntu* and nursing care. Taken together, it suggests that *Ubuntu* should be seen as a veritable tool that can be applied in Africa and across the globe to foster holistic nursing.

The final-year student nurses also provided their view on how the teaching and learning of *Ubuntu* can foster holistic care in nursing. *Ubuntu* can be taught in nursing education as a care concept to reinforce the students' learning of caring concepts in nursing. The teaching of *Ubuntu* to improve holistic nursing will be in line with the value and belief of an African nurse and that of the nursing care recipients.

 The participants opined that *Ubuntu* can be included in the teaching of caring in nursing education. In so doing, nurses of African origin may be able to see the connectedness between the African value of *Ubuntu* and holistic nursing. Combining both (*Ubuntu* as an innate instinct to care for others and caring in nursing as a professional call of duty to care) may help achieve wholeness in the form of proving holistic care that holistic nursing enshrines. This finding is in agreement with the finding from a previous study that investigated the possible impact of the integration of African traditional indigenous knowledge into the curriculum of health care sciences (Ngunyulu et al. 2020). The authors reported students as believing that the inclusion of African traditional indigenous knowledge

into the curriculums of health sciences disciplines taught at African Universities has the potential to improve the humanness of the graduates of those courses and may help them deliver culturally-acceptable services to their clients and patients. Moeta et al. (2019), also recommended in their study for the training of nurses to incorporate indigenous health knowledge to equip nurses on how to care for patients in a manner that respects their belief system.

A few of this study participants express a different opinion regarding how *Ubuntu* can foster holistic nursing. They submitted that the attitude of some nurses towards caring in nursing is not driven by *Ubuntu* but by the good pay and job security that the profession offers. For this reason, the respondents believe that it is unlikely these subsets of nurses can apply the *Ubuntu* to improve their holistic nursing practice. While some of this study participants opined that some nurses are in the profession for financial reasons, other studies have concluded that the opportunity for caring for patients is an important point of attraction for nurses to the profession (Eley et al. 2012). Put together, these findings have two implications. It may suggest that while a sizeable proportion of people may be attracted to the nursing profession due to the pecuniary gains afforded by the profession, a significant number of people are still drawn to the profession because of the allure of being able to care for people in need holistically, and *Ubuntu* can spur them to provide the highest level of care.

The uncertainties about how *Ubuntu* can foster holistic caring in nursing was also attributed to the fact that, despite going through training using a curriculum that is enriched with the principles of care practice, the caring behaviours of some of graduate/registered nurses are still found to be inadequate. The study participants expressed uncertainties on the effectiveness of *Ubuntu* as care ethics to improve the quality of nursing care.

Limitation

Due to the pandemic and compliance with the restriction placed on gatherings, the focus group interviews were virtual and held on electronic platforms. While the e-media provided ease in that participants did not need to be in the same physical location, it prevents obtaining additional non-verbal clues such as body language which could have been read by the researchers and used to ask further probing questions. These additional information could have enriched the data obtained further.

Conclusion

In this study, we reported that South African final-year nursing students identified the relationship between *Ubuntu* and holistic caring in nursing. They perceived *Ubuntu* to be a philosophy that can be taught with the goal of fostering holistic nursing practice. While *Ubuntu* represents an important care philosophy that can foster holistic nursing, there are hindrances that may mitigate against its application in nursing care, especially when goals other than the duty of care to patients is the driving force that attracted individuals to the profession.

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