Nurturance

The Spirit of Holistic Nursing

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In the theory of modeling and role modeling, the concept of nurturance is connected to holistic nursing practice. As nurturance is given and received within a context of unconditional acceptance, clients' needs are fulfilled and they can move toward a healthier state. An exploration of the literature revealed several defining attributes that clarify the definition of the concept as it is used by Erickson, Tomlin, and Swain. Model, borderline, related, and contrary cases further illustrate the meaning of nurturance and its relationship to holistic care. In addition, methods of measuring nurturance are discussed. An analysis of the concept brings an increased understanding of how nurses can care for clients in a manner that respects the uniqueness and value of each individual. The result is a client who experiences growth and renewal of strength, allowing optimal healing to occur.

Keywords: holistic; nurturance; modeling and role modeling; Maslow's hierarchy

Just as the gardener lovingly tends the soil, providing a young plant with water, nourishment, and a trellis to train and guide it upward toward the light, holistic nursing care nourishes the body, mind, and spirit of clients. An environment is created that promotes self-healing and a sense of balance and completeness as individuals travel through life’s journey (Dossey & Guzzetta, 2000). The gardener and the holistic practitioner may expect similar outcomes. The gardener’s care results in a healthy plant growing and gaining strength to gracefully bend without breaking during a windstorm. Holistic nursing care leads clients to experience increased physical, emotional, and spiritual strength. This increased strength enables clients to withstand the many challenges and changes that life brings. The gardener
and the holistic nurse use similar methods in that both practice the art of nurturance.

In the theory of modeling and role modeling, Erickson, Tomlin, and Swain (1983) describe the concept of nurturance as a defining characteristic of nursing practice that is linked with the provision of holistic care. These authors defined nurturance as a process that “fuses and integrates cognitive, physiological, and affective processes, with the aim of assisting a client to move toward holistic health” (p. 48). Erickson and colleagues also asserted that nurturance signifies nurses’ desire to understand clients’ models or perspectives of the world, enabling nurses to appreciate the unique viewpoints of the clients. The nurse is then able to role model or plan interventions that are specific to meet clients’ needs and assist clients to identify and develop strengths while progressing toward a healthier state.

It is appropriate that the concept of nurturance be an integral part of nursing theory and practice, as the terms nurse and nursing are derived from the word nurture (Geissler, 1990). In spite of the intertwining of the concept in the origin of the profession, few studies have examined the meaning of the word and its importance to nursing. This article will analyze the concept of nurturance and identify defining characteristics. Exploring the concept of nurturance will enable nurses to better understand the term as a basis for providing care to clients. Determining the defining attributes of nurturance may also allow for clarification of the concept as it is used in the theory of modeling and role modeling (Erickson et al., 1983) and enable nurse researchers to develop methods to measure the concept.

**USE OF THE CONCEPT**

The word nurture was first used in the 14th century, but the term nurturance did not appear until 1976 in the supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary (Geissler, 1990). Webster’s New World Dictionary (Agnes et al., 1999) identified two uses of the root word, nurture. The meaning of the word as it is used in biology was stated as “all the environmental factors, collectively, to which one is subjected from conception onward, as distinguished from one’s nature or heredity” (Agnes et al., 1999, p. 991). This use of the word nurture is often discussed in the literature (Sapolsky, 1997) as part of an ongoing debate about what determines human behavior. Some scientists believe genetics play a
larger role in controlling behaviors, whereas others think nurture, or environmental influence, is the dominating factor.

Erickson and colleagues (1983) explored similar ideas in their discussion of how people are different. They stated that people vary in genetic makeup, and these differences will affect response to stressors. Stressors as well as support systems are viewed as part of the environment. Support systems, including family, friends, and the health care system, are classified as external self-care resources that have the potential to assist clients in regaining energy and health. Therefore, nursing care could be considered part of nurture or part of the environment that assists clients to achieve a healthier state. This is accomplished as nurses model or assess clients’ needs by gathering data and attempt to see the world as the clients do. Nurses then can role model or plan interventions that respect the unique needs and outlooks of the clients.

A second meaning given for nurture is educating, nourishing, and raising (Agnes et al., 1999), whereas the term *nurturance* was defined as affectionate care and attention (Mish, 2002). Synonyms for the words included the following: to promote and sustain the development of, cultivate, foster, nourish, and nurse (Pickett, 1995). The use of the word *nurturance* to mean caring and promotion of growth is also reflected in modeling and role-modeling theory (Erickson et al., 1983) as nurses are encouraged to care for clients and promote client growth and development by offering support through listening, touch, and unconditional acceptance. These dictionary definitions and synonyms accurately reflect the concept of nurturance as it is portrayed in the literature. A review of nursing, psychology, and educational literature was completed. The review revealed four defining attributes of the concept of nurturance.

**Defining Attributes**

The first defining attribute was that of caring. *To nurture* was defined as caring for another by Stanfield and Stanfield (1997) in an article describing the consequences of a lack of nurturing behaviors in our society. Having the opportunity to express nurturance through caring for people was the most frequent response in a study asking students to list the reasons they chose nursing as a career (Kersten, Bakewell, & Meyer, 1991). Experiencing nurturance through caring
was also perceived as being a two-way interaction as nurses spoke of giving and receiving care from clients (Geissler, 1990).

The care given to pets by young adults was also connected to the concept of nurturance in a study examining the relationship between pet attachment and the developmental level of generativity, as defined by Erikson (1950, as cited by Marks, Koepke, & Bradley, 1994). The terms caring and nurturing were used interchangeably to describe the process that led to the development of participants’ feelings of attachment to pets. Curtin (1996) referred to an implicit relationship between caring and nurturance and contrasted the curative aspects of caring and its relationship to healing with the reductionistic view of separating the illness from the person. Providing nurturance, which leads to healing, was said to be expressed by nurses through caring behaviors such as touch.

Promoting growth and development was another attribute of nurturance revealed in the literature. Spiritual, emotional, and physical growth can occur as nurses interact with clients. In Geissler’s (1990) study of registered nurses’ perceptions of nurturance, promoting clients’ growth and development was identified by many of the participants as an important aspect of nurturance. Children’s needs for nurturance, provided through an environment that promotes growth and development, were addressed by Stanfield and Stanfield (1997). Promotion of growth and development was also included as a measure of nurturance on an instrument used to examine the patterns of interaction between parents and young children (Black, Dubowitz, Hutcheson, Berenson-Howard, & Starr, 1995).

Teaching was one method of promoting growth and development frequently identified in the literature. Geissler (1990) described nurses’ role as educator or teacher as one in which nurses assist and encourage clients to identify and use the strengths they possess to reach meaningful goals. Teaching children socialization skills was identified as an important component of nurturance by Stanfield and Stanfield (1997). In addition, Weisner (1994) discussed how African children are taught caretaking and work-related skills within the family. This, too, was considered to be an aspect of nurturance as families evaluated children’s growth and development by the children’s ability to provide assistance and support, or nurturance, to others.

A third defining attribute of nurturance was the provision of nutrition and feeding to meet physical and emotional needs. The emergence of this attribute was fitting as the verb to nurture originated
from the Latin word *nourish* (Flexner & Hanck, 1987). Stanfield and Stanfield (1997) noted the significance of food preparation as a way of expressing nurturance, and Weisner (1994) discussed the strong emotional feelings relating food, family, and the concept of nurturance. Black et al. (1995) recorded observations of parents feeding their children to measure nurturing behaviors, which suggested an implicit relationship between nurturance and the provision of nutrition. Comfort foods are described by Wood and Vogen (1998) as those that a loving family member would prepare for a sick child to demonstrate caring and concern. These special foods may, in later years, bring back feelings of being nurtured and may facilitate healing.

Assessing and meeting needs was a final defining attribute of nurturance identified in the literature. One aspect of Geissler’s (1990) definition of nurturance was “meeting physical, emotional, social and recreational needs” (p. 529). In addition to meeting needs, Weisner (1994) also included the recognition of needs as a vital part of the concept of nurturance. The expression of nurturance through helping people in need was also given as a motivating factor for choosing nursing as a career (Kersten et al., 1991). Finally, Etaugh and Folger (1998) related the concepts of need fulfillment and nurturance by using the item “sensitivity to needs of others” (p. 217) as part of a 7-point scale to measure participants’ perceptions of working parents’ nurturing behaviors.

The four defining attributes will be presented in a model case to further illustrate the meaning of the concept of nurturance. Walker and Avant (1995) stated that a model case gives the reader a comprehensive picture of a concept that fully demonstrates the meaning with clarity and certainty. The attributes that were generated from the review of the literature included caring, promotion of growth and development, nourishment, and assessing and meeting needs.

**MODEL CASE**

Jennifer, a registered nurse, works at a community senior care center. George, an 83-year-old retired high school teacher, attends the center 3 days a week. George’s wife of 60 years, Eileen, died 6 months ago, and he now lives with his daughter, son-in-law, and their two young daughters. George is withdrawn and lonely and says he feels “useless” and “is a burden to his family.” He is thin and states he “just doesn’t feel like eating” since his wife died.
Jennifer spends time listening and talking quietly with George. She uses gentle touch to reassure and comfort him and encourages him to gradually become more involved with the other participants at the center and to take part in the activities offered. She learns his favorite foods and makes sure some are included in meals, which are served in an attractive manner. Together, they investigate classes offered at the center, and George, with Jennifer’s encouragement, enrolls in a cooking class. He learns to prepare simple meals and proudly states he will now be able to “cook dinner for his grandchildren.”

This case contains all the defining attributes of the concept of nurturance and is an example of the provision of holistic care. Jennifer made special mealtime arrangements that enabled George to obtain adequate nourishment and contributed to his physical and emotional well-being. She also displayed caring behaviors as she spent time with George and treated him in a gentle, compassionate manner. Jennifer assessed George’s needs and realized his feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. These needs were met as she helped him reach out to others and learn new skills that led to his emotional and social developmental growth. As these needs were met, George was better able to adapt to the changes in his life and find his place within the family unit.

Another type of case model described by Walker and Avant (1995) is the borderline case. These cases contain some but not all of the defining attributes of a concept. Borderline cases help to clarify the meaning of the concept by displaying a situation in which only a partial picture of the concept is provided. The following is an example of a borderline case.

**Borderline Case**

George’s daughter, Ellen, is worried about her father. He has been very quiet and withdrawn since her mother died. He has lost weight and does not seem interested in eating. She knows he is having a difficult time adjusting since he moved in with her, her husband, and their two daughters. He frequently tells her, “I’m sorry for all the extra work I’m causing you.” Ellen spends extra time with her father talking about memories of the good times they have shared as a family. She fixes his favorite dishes and tries to encourage him to eat. One evening, George tells Ellen he wants to begin helping out with the cooking and household chores. “I’m taking a cooking class at the
"center," he tells her proudly. "That’s great, Dad," Ellen replies, "but I don’t want you cooking and cleaning. You’ve worked hard all your life. I just want you to sit back and relax. I can take of everything for you."

In this case, Ellen demonstrated caring and provided George with nourishment, but other attributes of nurturance were absent. By doing everything for him in a misguided attempt to meet his needs as she perceived them, Ellen did not promote his growth and development. George’s need to take responsibility and contribute to the family’s well-being were denied. Because this essential element of nurturance was not demonstrated, the model does not provide a complete representation of the concept of nurturance.

Cases that are associated with the concept being examined but do not feature the defining attributes are labeled related cases (Walker & Avant, 1995). These cases provide clarification of the concept being studied by presenting a concept that is linked to it but is essentially distinct. Empathy is an example of a concept that is related to nurturance but does not contain the same defining attributes. The following is an example of a related case featuring the concept of empathy.

**Related Case**

Kelly is also a registered nurse at the senior care center. Her eyes well up with tears as she looks at George sitting alone in the corner of the dining room. She knows George is grieving over the recent death of his wife. Kelly imagines how she would feel if something happened to her husband, Jason. She pictures herself eating dinner by herself, looking across at the empty chair at the dining room table. She envisions the lonely nights remembering the laughter and love they shared. The dining room comes back into focus as another nurse asks for Kelly’s help in the activity room.

This model demonstrating empathy shows a concept that is linked to nurturance yet is clearly different. Empathy may be an important part of being a nurturing individual as it implies feelings of caring that may lead to nurturing behaviors. However, it is in itself not nurturance as no specific behaviors are implied other than the act of entering another person’s world for the purpose of enhanced understanding. Empathy is usually defined in the literature as the ability to put oneself inside another person’s world, feel his or her emotions, and see things from his or her perspective while maintaining an
awareness of one’s own identity (Hart, 1999). This is very similar to Erickson et al.’s (1983) definition of modeling in the theory of modeling and role modeling. Other concepts that could be linked to nurturance include support and comfort.

Another type of case that can lend clarity to the concept under examination is the contrary case. This is described as a case that contains none of the defining attributes of the concept and is a clear example of what the concept is not (Walker & Avant, 1995). The contrary case enables the analyst to see with greater accuracy what defining attributes should and should not be present in relation to the concept of interest. The following is an example of a contrary case.

**Contrary Case**

Pat, a registered nurse, hurries down the hallway of the senior care center. The center is short staffed today, and she is tired and irritable. Pat notices George sitting alone at a table in the corner of the lunchroom. The other residents are eating, but George has not gotten up to get his food. Pat can see that he has been crying. She knows she should sit down with him for a minute and encourage him to eat, but she has a terrible headache and just does not have the patience to deal with George today. Later, as the other participants are going to the activity room, George hangs back indecisively. Pat asks, “George, are you coming or not?” George replies, “I’m not sure.” “Suit yourself,” Pat says shortly and leaves the room.

This case contains none of the defining attributes of the concept of nurturance. There is no evidence of nourishment, caring, promotion of growth and development, or assessment and meeting of needs. This description of an encounter between a nurse and client is devoid of any of these characteristics. This stark contrast allows for a clearer vision of what must be present for nurturance to occur.

**Antecedents and Consequences**

The defining attributes of the concept of nurturance have been identified and illustrated through the development of cases. However, to further refine these attributes, it is necessary to determine the antecedents and consequences of nurturance. Antecedents are those events that must take place before nurturance can occur. Conse-
quences are incidents that represent the outcome of the occurrence of nurturance (Walker & Avant, 1995).

An antecedent of nurturance is the ability of nurses to offer clients unconditional acceptance. Nurses who offer unconditional acceptance value clients as unique individuals and respect them in their present state of being while exploring with the clients the possibilities for the future. This is similar to the gardener who values the seed but has a vision of the flower it will become. When clients experience this acceptance, it provides a foundation from which growth and change can occur (Erickson et al., 1983).

The end results or consequences of nurturance include one or all of the following types of growth: physiological, psychological, cognitive, social, and spiritual. This growth will occur as the result of measures taken to meet client needs through nourishment, caring, and activities that promote growth and development. This correlates with Erickson et al.’s (1983) concept of role modeling, which involves planning interventions leading to basic needs fulfillment that are built on a theoretical foundation and are unique to clients. As unconditional acceptance is offered and needs are met, growth and development will take place (Erickson et al., 1983).

**Empirical Referents**

Even after definitions of defining attributes and explanations of antecedents and consequences are explored, measuring the occurrence of nurturance is difficult as it remains an abstract concept. No instrument was found in the literature that measured nurturance directly. There are ways to measure each of the separate attributes of nurturance, such as monitoring weight and laboratory tests to assess nutritional status. In addition, 11 different quantitative instruments are described in the literature to measure caring (Beck, 1999). It would also be possible to measure some aspects of growth and development such as the physical changes that occur as clients’ strength increases or cognitive advances that take place as new information and skills are learned. However, because emotional and spiritual growth are more elusive and difficult to measure, this may not be the best empirical referent of the concept.

Assessing and meeting needs is a key attribute that may allow for the measurement of nurturance. Needs fulfillment encompasses the concept of nurturance and can be accomplished through the
additional attributes of caring, promotion of growth and development, and provision of nourishment. However, it is important to remember that Erickson et al. (1983) asserted that needs fulfillment does not occur unless clients perceive their needs have been met. For example, consider the related case concerning Ellen, George’s daughter, who was reluctant to let George help with the household chores. Ellen may have believed she was meeting her father’s needs, but if George did not perceive his needs were being met because he desired increased responsibility, his growth and development could have been hindered.

There are instruments that measure needs fulfillment from clients’ perspectives. One example is the Basic Needs Satisfaction Inventory, which consists of 27 items that parallel the concepts of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Leidy, 1994). A 7-point Likert-type scale allows participants to rate their need satisfaction in the following five areas: physiology, safety and security, love and belonging, esteem and self-esteem, and self-actualization. Participants are asked how they feel about different items related to the five categories of basic needs and can choose from 1 (terrible) to 7 (delighted). Five subscale scores are obtained in addition to a total needs satisfaction score.

Another instrument used to measure basic needs satisfaction is the Needsort (Barnfather, 1993). This instrument also uses a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 to 5 to assess physiological, safety and security, and love and belonging needs fulfillment. The Needsort can be used together with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. This instrument allows participants to choose from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree) on 10 items related to self-esteem.

All three instruments discussed have been tested for internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha. Values of .83 for the category of physiological needs, .83 for safety and security, and .92 for love and belonging have been obtained for the Needsort (Barnfather, 1993). Internal consistency was .84 for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale used in Barnfather’s (1993) study of the relationship between basic need satisfaction and clients’ ability to mobilize resources to cope with stressors. The Basic Needs Satisfaction Inventory obtained a Cronbach’s alpha of .94 in a study conducted by Irvin and Acton (1996) concerning stress mediation in caregivers of cognitively impaired adults.

These instruments would begin to enable researchers to measure nurturance through the evaluation of basic needs fulfillment, which is a defining attribute of the concept. As needs fulfillment occurs
through the attributes of caring, nourishment, and promotion of growth and development, the concept of nurturance transpires and could be measured and evaluated. Measurements would allow researchers to better understand this concept, particularly in relation to role modeling, which Erickson et al. (1983) described as the “essence of nurturance,” (p. 95) and to determine relationships between the theories’ propositions.

CONCLUSION
An analysis of the concept of nurturance provides an enhanced understanding of its use in the theory of modeling and role modeling. In addition, an illustration is provided of the relationship between nurturance and holistic nursing practice. As nurturance occurs through the provision of holistic care, both nurses and clients are changed and strengthened. Nurses assist clients to discover, develop, and mobilize strengths and resources to enable clients to reach the desired states of health and well-being. The practice of holistic nursing allows for an atmosphere of mutual respect and acceptance as nurturance is given and received. Just as the gardener nurtures the seed and in turn experiences joy as the plant gains in strength and beauty, the holistic nurse finds reward as clients grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

REFERENCES


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