Research

Creation of an American Holistic Nurses Association Research Consultation Program

Sue Robertson, RN, PhD
California State University, Fullerton
Evelyn Clingerman, RN, PhD
University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing
Rothlyn P. Zahourek, PhD, PMHCNS-BC, AHN-BC
University of Massachusetts School of Nursing, Amherst
Carla Mariano, RN, EdD, AHN-BC, FAAIM
New York University College of Nursing
Bernadette Lange, PhD, DNS, AHN-BC
Florida Atlantic University College of Nursing

A goal of the American Holistic Nurses Association (AHNA) Research Committee is to prepare holistic nurses to conduct holistic nursing research. This article describes the creation of a Research Consultation Program and how the knowledge gained from the program will contribute to the development of a formal research mentor program.

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Introduction

There is a growing need to provide evidence-based knowledge regarding the efficacy and positive outcomes of holistic nursing care and practices. In fact, the granting of Specialty Status to Holistic Nursing by the American Nurses Association in 2006 required the American Holistic Nurses Association (AHNA) to have in place a well derived knowledge base particular to the practice of holistic nursing and to identify specific mechanisms for supporting, reviewing, and disseminating research to support its knowledge base. We believe that competence in the development and utilization of holistic research from an evidence-based approach is essential for educators and advanced practice clinicians of holistic nursing. Furthermore, an evidence-based approach encourages holistic nurse researchers to explore phenomena and ask practice-based questions in order to better understand human beings as whole and complete in the moment.

The AHNA's Research Committee's (RC) goals are to foster the growth of knowledge and expertise of individual holistic nurses and the organization and to prepare holistic nurses to conduct and use holistic nursing research (AHNA, 2012). Thus, helping holistic nurses at all levels of competency to develop and use evidence-based holistic knowledge is a major focus of the RC. The purpose of this article is to describe the creation of a consultation program (CP) to advance holistic nursing research within the AHNA membership.

Authors' Note: Please address correspondence to Sue Robertson, School of Nursing, 800 N State College Boulevard, EC-190, PO Box 6868, Fullerton, CA 92834-6868; e-mail: srobertson@fullerton.edu.
Background

Research using a holistic nursing framework explores phenomena central to the concerns of holistic nurses to advance holistic nursing knowledge and understanding of the human health experience (American Nurses Association, 2007). Holistic care occurs within the context of valuing persons, their environments, and their communities as a unitary whole and may include integrative, complementary, and alternative approaches to care. The theoretical basis and interpretation of holistic nursing research must be within the context of the value of persons and community as a unitary whole (person-environment), as holistic nurses believe that manifestations of health, illness, and wellness are inseparable from cultural, psychosocial, environmental, energetic, and spiritual influences (American Nurses Association, 2007). The RC is dedicated to supporting the ideals of the organization and the generation of nursing research to substantiate this valued phenomenon, which is essential to sustain holistic nursing.

The RC is comprised of members who have experience and interest in holistic nursing research. The committee is responsible for promoting holistic nursing research, mentoring holistic researchers, and teaching holistic nurses how to use evidence in practice. Consulting and mentoring are both part of this process and a priority goal of the committee. The committee defined holistic research in the 2009 Holistic Nursing White Paper as the following:

1. Extending, testing, and revising current theory and developing new theory
2. Investigating the processes and efficacy of interventions
3. Describing life experiences
4. Exploring holistic nursing practice
5. Comparing groups, communities, or cultures

RC activities to support holistic research include preconference workshops, presentations, and posters presented at the AHNA conference; research grant funding; dissemination of holistic research findings through web-based or teleconference media; developing the research section of the AHNA website as a repository for information and as a resource for members; and promoting awareness of the importance of holistic nursing research.

In the past, RC members informally consulted with and mentored holistic researchers and members. Typically, these consultations were performed by the research coordinator, one of the committee chairs, a designated researcher, or a researcher contacted by a member. As the AHNA continued to grow, the RC identified the need for a more formalized mentoring program involving both consultation and mentoring. The first consideration was to differentiate between the processes of consulting and mentoring. Although they share similarities, and both are typically defined in the dictionary as providing advice and guidance from an expert, to mentor is “to give advice and instruction to [someone] regarding the course or process to be followed” (“Mentor,” n.d.), whereas to consult is to give expert or professional advice (“Consult,” n.d.). Others have elaborated on the consultation relationship as a distinct from that of supervisor or teacher in that supervisor or teacher relationships have an evaluation component and clear expectations for an outcome (Forti, 1970). The consultant encourages the consultee to build on her or his previous fund of knowledge and experience but does not have an investment in or preconceived ideas about the outcome. The mentor relationship often has a preconceived goal as an end point, such as the consultee will submit a research grant proposal. In addition, the RC agreed that consultations are generally short term, whereas mentoring takes place over a longer period of time; the consultant–consultee relationship is generally less personally close than the mentor–mentee relationship; and the outcome of the consultant–consultee interaction is the responsibility of the consultee, whereas mentors are personally involved with and invested in the outcome. Our consensus in understanding helped shape the CP.

Development of the One-on-One Consultation

The notion of uniting an experienced holistic researcher with a novice was perceived as a way to stimulate interest in holistic nursing research among members of AHNA. In 2007, the RC worked with the AHNA conference planning committee to offer a consultation experience for novice researchers at the annual conference. This led to the establishment of a one-on-one consultation opportunity at the 2008 AHNA conference. The consultations at
the 2008 conference “tested the waters” by (a) identifying the level of member interest in a one-on-one research consultation at the annual conference, (b) determining how to best meet the needs of members interested in holistic research, and (c) determining how to best capture the experience of seasoned nurse researchers and RC members who were excited to foster relationships with novice researchers while building a community of researchers. Additionally, these consultations provided qualitative data from novice researchers that provided specific knowledge of researcher needs, barriers, and mentoring expectations during researcher role transitions.

A particular focus of the one-on-one research consultations was to provide short-term interactions between novice and experienced researchers with the potential for a mentoring relationship. During the consultation, the experienced researcher cultivated an atmosphere in which the consultee could freely share ideas and questions about holistic nursing research. The goal of the consultation was to support and sustain growth of the consultee-consultant relationship as an evolution of personal and professional knowing. Members attending the consultations evaluated the consultation as overwhelmingly positive in terms of support, knowledge, increased understanding of holistic nursing research, and furthering a strong interest in holistic nursing research. Based on observations and evaluations of the initial one-on-one consultation, the RC identified that novice holistic nurse researchers (a) were interested in pursuing holistic nursing research; (b) had diverse backgrounds; (c) had varied knowledge levels, from novice to experienced; (d) were more focused on holistic phenomena than more traditionally focused researchers; and (e) had significant interest in developing enduring research relationships with AHNA members. Based on this information, the RC identified the need for a formalized mentoring program. The next step was to determine the needs of AHNA members for consultation.

Needs Assessment

In 2009, members of the RC (Clingerman, Lange, McCaffrey, and Robertson) began a 3-year qualitative study to (a) explore the broader experience of consultations from the perspectives of both consultants and consultees, (b) identify the needs of each group for research support, and (c) identify factors that impede and support holistic research. The investigators believed these data were important to help the RC delineate essential components of an effective CP. The primary objectives of the CP were to (a) provide guidance and education for those lacking research knowledge; (b) assist researchers to design and implement research studies, programs, and grant proposals; (c) encourage research education development; and (d) provide consultation to expert and novice researchers.

Evaluations from consultations at the 2009 and 2010 annual conferences indicated members found the experience highly valuable. Sessions at the 2010 and 2011 conferences were filled to capacity and additional sessions were requested. Currently, consultees request a consultation when registering for the AHNA conference. Consultations address questions related to research topics, methods, process, evaluation, and dissemination. For example, previous consultees asked for assistance with: (a) refining study purpose and objectives, (b) narrowing the scope of their project, (c) identifying the best study design, and (d) refining the best methods for data analysis. Prior to each conference, the RC representative matches consultees with seasoned and knowledgeable consultants who have similar research interests and experiences.

The consultation process has continued to evolve to meet the needs of consultees. The perception of one-on-one consultations as a one-time interaction expanded to include a range of potential relationships, both short and long term, as consultees expressed interest in continuing to work with their consultants. Additionally, the RC committee noted that consultation meetings were normally scheduled at specific times during the conference, and there were always other events of interest to attendees during those times. A suggestion that grew out of the project was to expand meetings to include consultations prior to and following the conference. Last year, several consultee and consultant dyads decided to meet at times other than at the conference, such as phone consultations. These methods hold substantial potential for increased flexibility in scheduling consultations and increasing the quantity of consultations that can be provided in the future.

Development of the Group Consultation

The sustainability of holistic nursing practice is based on nurses who demonstrate courage,
commitment, and compassion. Elder members of AHNA demonstrated those attributes throughout their careers and had the wisdom and expert knowledge critical to the growth of holistic nursing; however, their stories had been neglected. Three members of the RC (Lange, Mariano, and Zahourek) conducted a descriptive historical study, the Legacy Research Project, to capture the historical roots and the legacy of AHNA through the visionary spirit of its elder members, or as one team member described, “our personal need to know and to preserve something that was important, delicate and time sensitive—our elders experiences with holistic nursing and how their belief system developed.” This research was designed to provide a foundation for a legacy-building model for holistic nursing and further serve as a perpetual archive of knowledge and inspiration for holistic nurses presently and in the future. Following institutional review board approval, project explanation, and consent, four elder AHNA members who had been highly committed to AHNA and its development were asked to participate. The research participants discussed their concepts of holism; inspiration for becoming holistic nurses; challenges, experiences, and lessons learned in their careers as holistic nurses; and wisdom, hopes, and dreams for the future of holistic nursing.

During the project, the three researchers explored the idea of presenting their experiences as holistic nurse research collaborators as a “group consultation” at the 2010 annual AHNA conference. This would provide conference attendees with an understanding of both historical research and conducting research as part of a group. The presentation, The Birth of a Research Project, provided an overview of how the project was conducted, from developing the research question through the analysis and dissemination of findings, using the three researchers’ process as an exemplar. The presentation highlighted the team’s reflective process as researchers: how their values, experiences, and philosophical orientations influenced their research decisions and how the research questions, methodology, and analysis were determined. The researchers also shared the struggles, challenges, discussions, and “aha” moments. Group consultation attendees were encouraged to participate, ask questions, or share their own experiences with the early stages of creating a research project. Attendance at the group consultation was extraordinary and participant evaluations reflected considerable interest in the group consultation method as an effective approach to research consultation in a conference venue.

**Conclusion**

The RC’s success in creating an effective CP was because of our collective willingness to recognize that “mentors must possess not only the capacity but also the opportunity to use their imagination” (McCloughen, O’Brien, & Jackson, 2010, p. 294) and value establishment of relationships (Records & Emerson, 2003). The innovative strategies used embody the holistic view of the person (consultees, consultants) and community (AHNA) as a unitary whole (person-environment), which is essential to advance holistic nursing research and sustain the specialty status of holistic nursing.

We “tested the waters,” sought information from AHNA members, and are now ready to develop a formalized research mentor program. The fact that mentoring has historical roots in the holistic concept of interconnections makes it exceptionally relevant and meaningful to foundational principles of holistic nursing. Mentoring is defined as growing, guiding, seeking excellence, supporting, motivating, imparting knowledge, sharing of experience, developing, and modeling and is a professional commitment within the discipline of nursing (Benner, 2001; Morton-Cooper & Palmer, 2000; National League for Nursing, 2006; Stewart & Krueger, 1996; Vance, 2005; Vance & Olson, 1991; Wagner, 2001). It is a “multidimensional relationship that energizes personal and professional growth” of both mentor and mentee (Wagner, 2001).

Based on mentor characteristics identified in the literature and what we have learned from four years of consultations, the RC views the expert holistic mentor as a holistic researcher who recognizes the mentee as whole and complete in the moment, is authentically present, and demonstrates a genuine interest in the mentee’s growth as a researcher or practitioner. This reciprocity of caring “as trusting the other to grow in his or her own time and way” (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 27) is a foundational value of holistic nursing. In addition, the researcher mentor must possess the key attributes of mentoring: a sense of humor, patience, and an understanding that professional collaboration and mentorship is essential to the advancement of holistic nursing research (Ali & Panther, 2008). These understandings will be the core of our developing mentor program.
References


Sue Robertson, RN, PhD, is an assistant professor of nursing at California State University, Fullerton, and a member of the American Holistic Nurses Association Research Committee.

Evelyn Clingerman, RN, PhD, is an assistant professor at The University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing, where her teaching expertise includes ethics, research, and theory. Her research has primarily focused on the health of underserved Mexican-origin migrant and seasonal farmworkers in sending and receiving communities and their experiences of living with chronic conditions, such as stress and type 2 diabetes. Her research involves mixed methods with more recent studies exploring the effects of stress through cognitive and biological pathways in this population. She served as a member of the research committee for the American Holistic Nurses Association for several years.

Rothlyn P. Zahourek, PhD, PMHCNS-BC, AHN-BC, is Research Coordinator, American Holistic Nurses Association, and Adjunct Faculty, University of Massachusetts School of Nursing, Amherst.

Carla Mariano, RN, EdD, AHN-BC, FAAIM, developed the Advanced Practice Adult Holistic Nurse Practitioner Program in the College of Nursing at New York University and is its immediate past Coordinator and developed the Holistic Nursing Program at Pacific College of Oriental Medicine. She is Past President of American Holistic Nurses Association and is currently its Membership and Chapter Coordinator. She was integrally involved in developing the Scope and Standards of Practice for holistic nurses and spearheaded the initiative that gave holistic nursing official recognition from the American Nurses Association as a distinct specialty within the discipline of nursing. She has conducted qualitative research on natural healing, gerontology, and interdisciplinary collaboration and has published widely and presented nationally and internationally on holistic nursing.

Bernadette Lange, PhD, DNS, AHN-BC is an assistant professor of nursing at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, and member of the American Holistic Nurses Association Research Committee.