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# An integrative review of Albertina Sisulu and ubuntu: Relevance to caring and nursing



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Caring forms the core component of nursing. The history of the nature of caring in South Africa is non-specific and is unknown. The impact of nurse and activist Albertina Sisulu – known as the *Mother of the Nation* – has the potential to offer unique insights into what could be the context of caring for nurses.

**Aims:** The study aimed at 1) critically synthesising the available evidence of caring as portrayed by Albertina Sisulu within the South African context, and 2) interpreting Sisulu's work within the Ubuntu philosophy as a framework for nursing and caring.

**Method:** An integrative review was completed using Whittemore and Knafl's framework. Key electronic databases, selected references and web-based search engines were scoured for articles meeting the inclusion criteria. This systematic and iterative approach yielded 18 non-research reports related to Sisulu; eight reports (three research, five non-research) related to ubuntu and nursing. Data was extracted that related to relevant and conclusive new and innovative practices in caring.

**Results:** The findings provided a context for practice guidelines of caring concerning knowledge and critical thinking about caring by nurses. Two primary factors emerged that demonstrated a culture of caring as seen through the prism of Sisulu's life: *devoted dancer* and *creation of a healing environment*. These factors also reflect African ubuntu principles, where the focus is on the relationships between people and how these relationships could be conducted.

**Conclusions:** Ubuntu and Sisulu's approach to caring have much to offer for the nursing profession in terms of developing of new directions for nursing pedagogy, curriculum, practice patterns, and policies that emphasise caring constructs.

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## 1. Introduction

Few women have left such a strong legacy like the South African Albertina Sisulu – nurse, midwife, mother, and activist (Anonymous, 2009, 2011) (see Fig. 1). The struggles encountered by Sisulu were no doubt instrumental in shaping the values she stood for as she worked to create change for a nation. There are few other concepts that have as much relevance to Sisulu's life and work than that of *caring*, a core component of nursing and midwifery.

The history of the nature of caring in South Africa is non-specific and is unknown. Sisulu's work, however, affords us the opportunity to gain a unique insight into caring from a South African historical perspective. Also, the philosophy of ubuntu plays a role in the history of caring. Roughly translated as “human kindness”, ubuntu is often interpreted as “humanity toward others” (Brack, Hill, Edwards, Grootboom, & Lassiter, 2003; Haegert, 2000; Mulaudzi, Libster, & Phiri, 2009; Murithi, 2009) and plays an important role in nursing.

### 1.1. Sisulu

The need to care for others began early in Albertina Sisulu's life. The impact of the 1918 Spanish flu left her mother weakened and in need of assistance (Albertina Nontsikelelo Sisulu, n.d). Her service-orientation was further fuelled by her conversion to Roman Catholicism in her teens and a desire to become a religious nun. These events strongly influenced her work, both as a professional nurse and as midwife, as well as her activism.

Initially thwarted by economic hardship in her efforts to finish school and become a nurse, Sisulu took to nursing “like

a duck to water” (Sisulu, 2003). A lifetime of caring for others and self-discipline made her well-suited for work as a nurse. Completing her nursing education in 1944, she took a position as a midwife at Johannesburg General Hospital where she worked with Nelson Mandela's first wife, Evelyn, and her future husband's sister, Barbie (Albertina Nontsikelelo Sisulu, n.d). She received her midwifery qualification in 1954 and was subsequently employed by the Johannesburg Health Department as a midwife. In this position she visited township patients on foot.

Generous to a fault, her work as a nurse allowed her to be the breadwinner and carer for three sons, two daughters, and two adopted children, as well as other extended family and grandchildren. She appreciated education and this value was reflected in the sacrifices she made to further the education of those she loved. Her Soweto home had a garden that has been described as immaculate and supported a determination and generosity to feed every visitor – no matter how little was to be had (Sisulu, 2003).

Later professional work would find Sisulu working in Soweto beside Dr Abu Baker Asvat, a physician and leading anti-apartheid activist who was murdered in 1989 (Layman). They were described as kindred spirits who sought to eliminate apartheid and improve the plight of those suffering under the apartheid state. The relationship between Asvat and Sisulu has been described as that of mother and son (Sisulu, 2003).

Sisulu's adult life was dominated by poverty, sacrifice, self-discipline, racism, relentless persecution, detention, and worry about the health and wellbeing of those she loved (Sisulu, 2003). She quietly but fervently worked for justice and equality and she did so with a belief that women play a clear role in creating social and political change; she called this a

Nontsikelelo Albertina Sisulu was born in 1918 and died in 2011. She was a nurse and a South African anti-apartheid activist who together with her husband, Walter, and friend Nelson Mandela, worked to create the new rainbow nation. A founding member of the Federation of South African Women in 1953, she was also a member of the African National Congress Women's League. Albertina was an organiser of the historic 1956 march against pass laws, among other critical involvement to end apartheid. Her activism efforts resulted in an 18-year ban – longer than for any other South African. She also endured two years in jail. With the end of apartheid, she was elected to the first democratic parliament in 1994, a tribute to her reputation and hard work.

While now recognised for her quiet activism, less has been written about her work as a nurse. She was a gentle women who believed in creating change through peace. She cared deeply for her family and patients, and it was her caring presence which helped in the birth of a new nation.



Fig. 1 – Mother of the Nation: nurse and midwife Albertina Sisulu (Sisulu, 2003).

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