

# Beliefs about health and wellness

[Countries](#), [China](#)



Beliefs About Health and Wellness: A Comparison of American and Chinese Cultures Being knowledgeable about cultural differences prevents misconceptions of a culture by the viewing of another. The culture in which a person lives tends to imprint its beliefs and morals on that person from the time he/she is born. In this essay, I will compare cultural values and beliefs about health and wellness in American and Chinese cultures. Since this is a huge subject I will limit the discussion to four aspects: Cultural Values Family Characteristics Causes of Illnesses Modalities of Diagnosis and Treatment It is very important for nurses to be able to provide culturally competent care, which means that they need to learn as much as possible about the belief system and practice of their patients, and apply those knowledge when providing care. As the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health wrote in his definition of cultural competency (2005): “ health care services that are respectful of and responsive to the health beliefs, practices and cultural and linguistic needs of diverse patients can help bring about positive health outcomes”(para 2).

Cultural Values Our society, in the United States, is made up of people from many different culturally diverse backgrounds. Culture includes both dominant and minority groups. A dominant group is the group within a country or society that has the most authority to control values and sanctions of the society, and in the United States it is composed of white middle-class people. According with Taylor, Lillis, LeMone and Lynn (2008), some of the values of our society include the following: “ youth and beauty, success and achievement, independence and self-reliance, technology, duty and conscience”(p. 56). In contrast, one of the oldest cultures in the world,

China has different values: high respect for age, strong sense of self-respect and self-control, strong emphasis on harmony, and the avoidance of conflict.

**Family Characteristics** The nuclear family, consisting of a father, a mother and their children all in one house dwelling, is prevalent in the American culture. This can be contrasted with the extended family, common in China. Most of the times, an extended family includes grand-parents, their sons and their son's families. In the United States, every family member is equal with the others and makes decisions for his/her medical care. The male is the dominant figure in China and generally makes decisions for all family members. Also, "the welfare of the family as a whole is more important than that of a single member in the Chinese culture" (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 56).

**Causes of Illnesses** Most of the people in our country believe that dangerous agents generate the diseases; the most common examples of these agents are: germs, chemicals, radiation, and trauma. On the other hand, Taylor et al. (2008) found that "in the Chinese culture illness and disease are attributed to an imbalance between yin (feminine, negative, dark, cold), and yang (masculine, positive, light, warm)"(p. 56). A healthy diet is considered important to promote wellness in both cultures. While in the United States we are cautious regarding the quality, composition, number of calories, allergens, etc., of the food, in China improper diet is seen as an imbalance between cold and hot foods. Certain food groups serve as staples of the diet based on culture. For example, rice and vegetables are the staple of the Chinese diet, while meat and potatoes are a staple of the American diet.

**Diagnostic and Treatment** In the United States patients value the progress of medical technology and the positive out-comes of its use in establishing a

precise diagnosis. Taylor et al. (2008) wrote that: “ traditional Chinese population may refuse having diagnostic studies done because they believe that a skilled physician can diagnose an illness by talking to the patient, performing a physical examination, and employing the ancient arts of tongue and pulse diagnosis”(p. 57). Different pulse qualities indicate different problems a person may suffers from and give an indication of the overall constitution of the patient. Also, different tongue colors, shapes and coatings indicate specific different problems within a person's body. Tongue and pulse characteristics are used together, as diagnostic tools to derive a diagnosis for a patient's condition and to enable the practitioner to determine a treatment plan of action to restore harmony back to the patient's body and eliminate disease. In any culture symptoms are the starting point in establishing a diagnosis. One of the most frequent symptoms is pain, a warning from the body that something is wrong. Many of the expressions and behaviors exhibited by people in pain are culturally prescribed. American culture encourages the open expression of emotions experienced by a person in pain; whereas, Chinese people frown on the open and free expression of emotions. Therefore, in China, the nonverbal signs of discomfort, such as facial grimacing or wincing and holding of painful area are important clues to the care provider. The cultural value and beliefs impact the way people follow and respond to treatment. Our American patients mainly benefit of the available scientific modalities: medications and surgical treatments. Sometimes they may add to this alternatives and complementary therapies. In China the use of herbs, diet and the application of hot and cold therapies are the main modalities of culturally based

traditional care. Herbs are used in many cultures and it is well known that they serve as a base to obtain numerous medications used in modern western medicine. The unique way herbs are used in Chinese medicine is described by Carteret (2008): " Herbs are prescribed holistically according to the patient's individual condition (not only on the basis of current symptoms). Herbal medicines are used to regulate the natural balance of the body and restore health" (para 2). Other therapeutic modalities developed in China as a result of the belief that illness is an imbalance in the energy levels are the following: massage, acupuncture, and acupressure. Those are based on the idea that there are points on the body that are located on energy pathways. If the energy flow is out of balance manipulation of the pathways is necessary to restore the energy equilibrium. I think the few similarities and differences between the two cultures, presented in my essay, are relevant for the significance of cultural factors in health and illness. To be able to provide culturally competent care to patients from diverse backgrounds nurses must be aware and informed about culturally diverse needs, characteristics, and values of individuals, families, and groups. This information should be obtained from the patient, if possible, a family member, or through research. A careful merging of nurses' and patients' cultural beliefs is a necessary prerequisite for safe, considerate, and successful nursing care. References Carteret, M. (2008). Traditional Asian Health Beliefs and Healing Practices, Chinese Herbal Medicine. Retrieved February 4, 2011, from: [http://www.dimensionsofculture.com/home/traditional\\_asian\\_health\\_beliefs\\_and\\_healing\\_practices](http://www.dimensionsofculture.com/home/traditional_asian_health_beliefs_and_healing_practices) Taylor, C., Lillis, C., LeMone, P., Lynn, P. (2008). Fundamentals of Nursing The Art and

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