ON THE MARGINS: NURSES AND THE INTERMITTENT CARE OF PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA – A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Nursing

at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

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2001
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research has been to explore the representations and practices of nurses in the context of intermittent care for people with dementia, and to situate their accounts within the wider discourses of dementia care. Discourse, as explicated by Michel Foucault, is the body of knowledge, and the related disciplinary practices, that can be considered to be the truth at a particular time, shaping what is possible to be said, and with the associated power to exclude what cannot be said. In the first section of the thesis it is argued that the concept of dementia is not the description of some pre-determined biological phenomenon but a powerful disciplinary construction informed by a specific historical and cultural perspective, a construction that has major policy implications and ramifications for the representations of dementing illnesses in disciplines such as nursing.

Section two of the thesis shifts from the disciplinary representations of dementia produced in published texts, to the representations and everyday practices of the nurses and families who participated in this study. While all the nurses’ texts represented the care of the person with dementia as problematic, at times, in the institutional setting, there was considerable diversity apparent in nurses’ discursive positionings, and in the associated practices and inscriptions of the person with dementia. The organisational context emerged as a major factor influencing those discursive choices and practices. One research site provided particularly successful respite care as judged by family caregivers’ expressions of confidence in the service. The dominant nursing discourse in this site framed the hospital as home-like and the relationship with patients as being family-like. The permeability of social and geographic boundaries at this research site signaled inclusion for family and patients in contrast to the more traditional boundaries demarcating social and physical spaces evident in the other sites.

This study highlights the institutional bases of powerful discourses such as biomedicine as well as the existence of alternative discourses. The marginal discourse of care as being family and home-like may lack the authority of biomedical and formal nursing discourses, situated as it were outside the academy, but space is provided in this representation to produce a social environment, and nursing practices, that encourage a sense of relationship
and social inclusion for people with dementia and their family caregivers. Dementia has proved to be a fruitful area of study in that the current dominance of biomedical knowledge in nursing literature can be challenged as being marginal to nursing concerns. The subsequence discussion of how nurses have suppressed the knowledge and interests of people with dementia and, indeed, the knowledge of nurses themselves, provides a productive starting point for wider discussion about issues of power/knowledge in nursing representations generally.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the many people that have contributed to this project. Firstly, I thank the participants in this project, the nurses and family caregivers, whose involvement made this work possible. They shared their ideas and time willingly and unselfishly in order to work towards improving services for people with dementia. I wish also to acknowledge the contribution of the people with dementia who kindly gave me permission to observe nurses in action caring for them.

My supervisors, Dr Judith Christensen and Dr Anne Opie, have played instrumental roles throughout the process of carrying out this Ph.D. study and I feel privileged to have had such wise and knowledgeable mentors. My thanks to Dr Judith Christensen for her support, and for providing reassurance during the difficult times. I have appreciated her experience as a supervisor in helping me negotiate the various stages of writing a thesis with confidence. Dr Anne Opie has been a challenging and stimulating supervisor who has greatly extended my thinking and writing. I thank Anne for the interest she has taken throughout this lengthy project and for her academic rigor.

I have received much appreciated institutional support for this project from what was Wellington Polytechnic, and now is Massey University in Wellington, in the form of help with study fees, textbooks, computer support and time to do the research. My colleagues in the Department of Nursing, Health and Environmental Sciences have also been supportive and encouraging. A special thanks to Denise Blanchard for providing technical expertise with diagrams and illustrations. The library staff have been helpful and in particular Paul Orsman has provided valuable assistance. I must also acknowledge grants from the New Zealand Nursing Education and Research Foundation and from the Greater Wellington Region New Zealand Nurses' Organisation Education Trust which have provided financial support for the costs arising from data collection.

My family and friends have been constantly sustaining with their interest and support throughout the research. In particular, I want to thank Dr Annette Huntington and Bridget
Robson. I have shared the experience of Ph.D. study with Annette and our collegial relationship and friendship has been intellectually and emotionally sustaining throughout all this period. I thank Bridget for her interest and support, our long conversations sharing and debating theoretical visions have strengthened my commitment to this project. I also wish to acknowledge the contribution made by Bridget and Dr Robin Watt in proof reading this document. Finally I would like to acknowledge my mother and father, Betty and Jim, for always providing loving support, along with other members of my family. Thank you for being understanding about my preoccupation with this project.
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