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The therapeutic relationship
Perceptions of mental health nurses

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Philosophy in Nursing
at Massey University
Albany campus, New Zealand

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2000

ABSTRACT

The therapeutic relationship is a concept that has become central to the identity and practice of mental health nurses since it was formulated by nursing theorists in the 1930s. Most commonly associated with the work of the late Hildegard Peplau, the therapeutic relationship has been considered both fundamental to nursing generally and to capture the unique focus of mental health nursing: interpersonal engagement with consumers of mental health services. However this dual role, and the absorption of specialist mental health nursing education into generalist nursing education, has left the specialty in a problematic situation in identifying and articulating its unique contribution to mental health care. This problem is at its most acute in inpatient settings where, ironically, mental health nursing has its strongest historical roots.

In this study I have sought to describe mental health nurses' perceptions of the therapeutic relationship. Rather than ask, as many previous studies have done, whether mental health nurses interact therapeutically with consumers I have sought the views of mental health nurses themselves. A constructionist research paradigm has been used to develop the research. From within a constructionist paradigm, phenomena are seen as socially constructed rather than objectively available for observation. Language is regarded not as a transparent medium of description, but as theory-laden. Focus groups were used to gather data from experienced nurses in three different practice settings; inpatient care, community care and from nurse-therapists. By attending to the group as the focus of analysis it was possible to develop a broad view of the therapeutic relationship.

The themes reported here describe the therapeutic relationship as fundamental to mental health nursing, independent of theoretical accounts of mental health nursing and mental health care, and with a wide scope, from facilitative listening to involvement in coercive interventions. The therapeutic relationship in mental health nursing has emerged as a phenomenon socially constructed by its development as part of a therapeutic discourse in mental health care in the middle of the last century, and through the influence of current practice contexts. From the description developed in this study it has been possible to make recommendations for mental health nursing education, research and practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who helped in the process of developing this thesis. Without the help and support of family and colleagues writing the thesis would have been an impossible undertaking.

I would especially like to thank my partner Joan, for her patient support and encouragement. Also my children Clare, Gabrielle and Timothy for their tolerance of my absence and preoccupation during the long periods of writing.

Christine Palmer provided academic support and critique over a two year period. Christine's passion for mental health nursing, honest critique of the early drafts, and doggedness in the face of my persistent grammatical crimes has contributed immensely to the work. I received valuable critique on the section on constructionism from Ray Nairn, and on the themes chapters from Sharon Rydon. I am grateful for help received from Saira Khan and Toni Cathie who assisted by typing transcripts.

To the subscribers to the psychiatric nurses' and qualitative researchers' internet discussion lists who responded to questions and shared ideas that contributed to the ideas presented here, I am grateful for the interest, enthusiasm and generosity of colleagues I have yet to meet.

The many students and colleagues who discussed aspects of this work with me during the course of the study have helped in immeasurable ways to develop the ideas presented here. I owe a special debt of gratitude to the nine participants who gave freely of their time to participate in the interviews. I hope you feel that in the end the time was well spent, and that the thesis presented here is true to the views you expressed.

The study was conducted with ethics approval from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee and the Auckland Ethics Committee.

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