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**FROM UNCONSCIOUS TO SELF-CONSCIOUS
COGNITIVE REHABILITATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM**

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

There is increasing awareness and concern that psychosocial problems prevent people with brain damage reestablishing an acceptable quality of life. Changes in perception and cognition appear to alter a person's relationships, preventing a successful reintegration into the community. As a result, many researchers and rehabilitation practitioners have been calling for more holistic models of recovery which recognise the psychosocial domain and which offer strategies to counteract these problems.

In this study, the principles of symbolic interactionism are used to explore the experience of four people with traumatic brain injury. A life history was collected for each person and the four life histories were examined for common patterns and themes. A videocamera was then used to record their daily life in a residential rehabilitation programme. The film collected included formal one-to-one therapy sessions, group situations and informal interaction in the living areas, dining room and passageways etc. The four people (and also those with whom they interacted) were shown selected excerpts from this film and interviewed about what was happening. Several common themes emerged from this process and these themes are examined within a theoretical framework which recognises the central role of a *dual, interacting and interpreting self, creating meaning* through an *adapting and accommodating* process.

Theory and literature about brain damage and about inner brain processes is revisited from this perspective of the person as a *meaning negotiator* and some conclusions are reached about the impact of brain damage upon lived experience. In particular, the role of a *moral self* or an *inner conjured audience* is considered, as well as the role of *emotional intersubjectivity* within *relationships*. Some new insights are offered as to how people resolve the problem of continuing to interact with their world when it is difficult for them to make sense of it or interpret it, and how other people's responses influence this process.

The findings of the research suggest adaptations to both *settings* and *relationships* may be necessary for a successful recovery after brain injury. The importance of providing *scaffolding* of the meaning-negotiating process during a *liminal period* of recovery is noted. Some suggestions are offered as to interactive strategies which foster *adaptive, purposeful and independent* lifestyles. The thesis concludes that because realities are created through interaction, the principles of symbolic interactionism should become more central in the designing of rehabilitation programmes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Four years ago, when I enrolled in a post graduate research paper in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, I began a process which has culminated in the presentation of this thesis. At that time, I had returned to academic study after a 13 year absence because of a vague but pressing need to explore more deeply and understand more fully the experience of the people I worked with. Associate Professor Andrew Trlin and Associate Professor Robyn Munford, my supervisors, took my vague sense of mission and helped me turn it into the goal-directed and fulfilling enterprise of a thesis. Over the years there have been many times when the production of this thesis threatened to overwhelm me but each time they have both been there to guide, encourage and support me. They have ploughed through thousands of pages in their efforts to reduce my effusive and disorganised passion for my subject into something other people could comprehend and learn from. I thank them both from the bottom of my heart.

Just as great a debt is owed to Professor Norman Denzin. From the moment that I discovered the term 'symbolic interactionism' I knew I had found the theoretical framework to make sense of the experiences I was observing at Waimarie. From that time onwards, every idea I was excited by, and wanted to explore further, I would discover that he had been there before me and had developed exactly the models of interactive and intra-active process which I needed to make the necessary connections between knowledge available about neurological disorders, and theory about phenomenological, interpretive and interactive experience.

The greatest debt however, I owe to the four men who agreed to be the central focus of my study as well as to the larger group they represented. Over the seven years I have worked with people who have brain damage I have been constantly awed by the way people faced with seemingly impossible obstacles respond. By sharing their experience, they have convinced me of the power of the human spirit to achieve a sense of integrity and wholeness no matter how serious the disability, given appropriate support. My thesis is an attempt to express in words, some small part of what these people live each day so that those who live and work with them may be better equipped to keep up with them.

I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to the families of these four men and to the staff and residents of Waimarie who were involved (often just as intensely) as participants in this study. Many of these people selflessly gave hours of their time and generously accepted my

examination and interpretation of sometimes very personal and sensitive experiences. I did not realise when I designed my study, just how much I would be demanding of people in my interviews with them, or how intrusive a videocamera could be, and yet I received only encouragement and enthusiastic support from others. Several people explained that they shared their experience in the hope this thesis might help others. As a symbolic interactionist, I regard this sharing as the greatest gift that one person can give another and only hope I have done them justice in my presentation of their experience.

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