The dialectic of control: A critical ethnography of renal nurses’ decision-making

Thesis submitted by

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STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

This thesis has been made possible through the support of many people as follows:

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KEY TO TRANSCRIPTS AND FIELD NOTES

In the presentation of the research findings (Chapter 5, 6 and 7), where excerpts from the participants are included, the following abbreviations and font styles have been used:

**Long quotes:** All the names used within this thesis are pseudonyms (refer to appendix 2 for further information). Pseudonym name, date and paragraph or sentence (#) identifies excerpts from participant interviews.

E.G.  I felt that this was not the case but the other nurse did not seem to pay any attention (Julie, 26/10, # 16).

**Short quotes:** When a few words, or word, have been applied within a sentence in the main text, this is specified through the use of italics.

E.G.  It was not unusual for the nurses to speak *about being in control* and *autonomous* in their practice as they went about their day.

**Field notes (FN):** Field notes are signified as FN, and are structured in the same manner, with exception to the font style of italics. Regular font refers to researcher comment. Comments made by nurses that have been captured as fieldnotes are indicated by speech marks and are not verbatim.

E.G.  *Julie held the cup in her hand and proceeded to the door. [I watched from a distance but close enough to see her facial expression] She listened tentatively to what the doctor was saying but seemed doubtful of the diagnosis as she raised her eyes in an upward motion, later adding that “nothing changes!”* (FN, 23/7, # 5).

... Indicates that the researcher has edited the material
ABSTRACT
Renal disease in Australia is increasing at an alarming rate. Many of the patients presenting with renal failure are from rural and remote areas where renal and other health care services are minimal. What services are available tend to be predominantly managed by nurses because of the way that renal services are organised in regional areas. Consequently, there is an assumption that renal nurses are autonomous in their practice and accountable for the decisions they make. The purpose of this study was to explore these assumptions within the bounds and context of a regional renal unit. The aim of the study was to increase nurses’ awareness about their responsibility when taking on expanded nursing roles in terms of their decision-making ability, and capacity, and what this means in terms of accountability.

Critical ethnography was adopted as the methodology to explore the nature of decision-making in the renal unit context. Particular emphasis was placed on how nurses used their knowledge during daily routine practice. Carspecken’s (1996) five-stage method of critical ethnography incorporated periods of prolonged participant-observation, structured and unstructured interviews and documentation review. Concepts from Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory provided a theoretical framework that sensitised the researcher to certain ‘aspects of nursing practice’ to guide data collection and analysis. These, in turn, provided major chapter headings for the thesis: decision-making across time-space encounters (Contextuality), the rules and resources (Social Structures) available for decision-makers and the nurses’ ability and skills (Knowledgeability). In addition, Giddens (1984) ‘Dialectic of Control’ was threaded throughout the finding chapters as a major theme that addressed the nurses’ capacity (power and control) to make and implement decisions. Collectively the researcher and participants gained new insights about decision-making practices, during reflection and dialogue, one learning from the other. It was assumed that if, and when, decision-making concerns were recognised, the nurses themselves could possibly make changes to their practice with the aim of enhancing patient outcomes.

Time-space played an important factor in controlling nurses’ decision-making, but this was often in complex and subtle ways. Encounters across time-space often
controlled who made decisions and when. This alternating decision-making behaviour caused conflict and confusion that, at times, undermined some nurses’ authority and overall responsibility as decision makers. Even though many nurses spoke about being autonomous decision makers, most unknowingly followed established routines and practices that was not always conducive to best-practice principles. Social structures, the rules and resources, could enable and constrain decision-making within this context. The rules that nurses ascribed to were not always known at a discursive level, therefore, rationale could not always be given for the decisions they made. When rules could be spoken about, not all the nurses followed them. Reasons for breaching unit rules varied such as out-dated rules or policies, limited resources that required ‘short-cuts’ and, at times, no recognition that rules were being broken. Knowing the rules and prescribing to routine practices provided a sense of safety as the nurses made decisions. This did not necessarily mean that best decisions were being made but gave a presentation that the decisions being made were satisfactory. Knowledgeability about the rules and resources available to nurses, and decision-making encounters across time-space, appeared to be a key feature that enabled the nurses to exercise their dialectic of control. When a nurse had, or perceived to have, control over the decisions they made, this, in turn, facilitated a sense of “being autonomous”. Despite this shared perception of being in control, several nurses remained frustrated and constrained by bureaucratic policies and hierarchical structures. However, the nurses, too, could create these constraints, knowingly or unknowingly, as they went about their day.

Recommendations resulting from these findings include that further research is required on certain aspects of decision-making such as the role emotions play when making decisions, how ethical issues embedded in routine practice are recognised, and how risk and uncertainty are acknowledged and then managed. When nurses do not question their decision-making roles, they can become constrained in their decision-making capacity and ability. Without deliberate reflection aspects that control nurses’ decision-making may never be exposed, thus changed. The implications of this study are central for both patient outcomes and the professional development of nursing.
Table of contents

THESIS SUBMITTED BY ................................................................. I
STATEMENT OF ACCESS ............................................................... II
ELECTRONIC COPY .................................................................. III
STATEMENT OF SOURCES ......................................................... IV
STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS ............... V
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .............................................................. VI
KEY TO TRANSCRIPTS AND FIELD NOTES ............................. VII
ABSTRACT .................................................................................. VIII

CHAPTER ONE: SETTING THE SCENE ....................................... 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY ................................................. 1
  Finding the research question ..................................................... 2
  Positioning myself as a nurse and researcher ............................... 3
DECISION-MAKING IN THE STUDY UNIT ................................. 4
RENAL HEALTH CARE IN AUSTRALIA ...................................... 5
  Renal nursing shortages - local and global ............................... 6
  The birth of nephrology nursing ............................................... 7
  Dialysis in Australia .................................................................. 7
THE ROLE OF RENAL NURSES IN AUSTRALIA ......................... 9
  Consequences of renal technology – dilemmas and opportunities ... 10
  Autonomous practitioners? ..................................................... 10
    Giddens’ concept of power and control .................................... 11
  Standards of practice .......................................................... 13
SIGNIFICANCE OF CLINICAL DECISION-MAKING FOR RENAL NURSES .................................... 14
THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF CRITICAL RESEARCH APPROACH .................................................. 15
  Structuration theory ............................................................. 16
STRUCTURE AND OUTLINE OF THE THESIS ......................... 19

CHAPTER TWO: THE DECISION-MAKING LITERATURE ............. 22

INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 22
  The evolution of nurses’ decision-making research ..................... 23
THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO DECISION-MAKING .............. 24
  Prescriptive and normative decision-making models .................. 25
  Descriptive decision-making models ....................................... 26
    Information processing ....................................................... 27
NURSING KNOWLEDGE THAT INFORMS DECISIONS .............. 27
  Bounded rationality ............................................................ 28
  Skills acquisition and the role of intuition ............................... 29
  Novice-expert decision-making ............................................... 31
    Intuition, analytical or both? ............................................... 32
CHAPTER FOUR: THE STUDY’S RESEARCH METHODS

INTRODUCTION

The research setting

THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND RIGOUR OF THE STUDY

The role of the researcher and participants

Insider or outsider?

Investigator responsiveness

Appropriate sampling: participant selection

HOW STRUCTURATION THEORY WAS USED IN THE STUDY

Stage 1: Building a primary record - the etic perspective

Stage 2: Preliminary re-constructive analysis

Stage 3: Dialogical data generation

Triangulation as a research strategy

Journaling and self-reflection

Individual and group member checking

Stages 4 and 5: Conducting system analysis

Pulling the loose ends together

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Informed consent

Anonymity and confidentiality

CHAPTER FIVE: CONTEXTUALITY

AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEXTUALITY

TIME

LIFE-SPAN TIME: NOVICE TO EXPERT

Learning the ropes - the novice

The learning culture - a matter of trial and error

When in Rome... new to the unit

When the ropes were known - the experts

Passing the buck or maintaining the mark?

Seeking approval

REVERSIBLE TIME - THE DURÉE OF ACTIVITY AND LONGUE DURÉE OF INSTITUTIONS

Routines and social practice

Get them on!

Decision-making reliance across time

Doing much the same

DIVIDING AND ALLOCATING TIME

Unintentional loss of time control
DECIDING TREATMENT TIME ........................................................................................................... 139
  Ethical decision-making: awkward decisions ........................................................................... 140
  Saving nursing time ................................................................................................................... 143
SPACE ............................................................................................................................................. 144
  The nurses’ station .................................................................................................................... 146
  Front and back regions of decision-making .............................................................................. 147
TIME-SPACE AND DECISION-MAKING .............................................................................................. 148
  Positioning-self ......................................................................................................................... 148
ENCOUNTERS: PRESENCE AND CO-PRESENCE .............................................................................. 150
  Patient-nurse decision-making encounters ............................................................................... 150
    Low and high presence availability .......................................................................................... 153
  Nurse-nurse decision-making encounters ............................................................................... 154
    Sharing decision-making space ............................................................................................... 155
  Doctor-nurse decision-making encounters ................................................................................ 158
DECISION-MAKING OUTSIDE THE RENAL UNIT LOCALE .............................................................. 161
CHAPTER SUMMARY ....................................................................................................................... 162

CHAPTER SIX: SOCIAL STRUCTURES .................................................................................... 164
INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................... 164
RULES ............................................................................................................................................. 165
  Rules across time-space ............................................................................................................ 166
NORMATIVE RULES IN DECISION-MAKING .............................................................................. 168
  Makers and followers of rules ................................................................................................... 169
    Prescriptive rules of practice ................................................................................................. 171
  Breaking rules ........................................................................................................................... 172
    Don’t forget the phosphate binders ......................................................................................... 173
    Always two on the floor ......................................................................................................... 174
POLICIES AND PROCEDURES ............................................................................................................ 175
  Watching you, watching me ....................................................................................................... 179
  Rules of thumb ........................................................................................................................... 180
ACCIDENTAL OR INTENTIONAL BREAKING OF RULES: WHICH IS WHICH? ......................................... 183
  Dangerous liaisons - deciding how much fluid to remove ........................................................ 185
    When is an error an error? ....................................................................................................... 190
TAILORING PRACTICE RULES ........................................................................................................... 191
  Work rules and nursing autonomy ............................................................................................ 192
  Knowledge rules of practice ...................................................................................................... 194
  New and old rules ...................................................................................................................... 195
RULES OF SIGNIFICATION .............................................................................................................. 196
  Rules of treatment (non)compliance ......................................................................................... 200
  Rules of signification extending space .................................................................................... 202
RULES CONTROLLING THE DIALECTIC OF CONTROL - A SUMMARY ................................................... 203
RESOURCES - STRUCTURES OF DOMINATION ................................................................................... 204
ALLOCATIVE MATERIALS IN THE UNIT ............................................................................................ 204
Fluffy-duffy ‘non-clinical’ decisions ............................................................................................... 205
Just another resource! ................................................................................................................... 207
The new dialyser .......................................................................................................................... 208
Who informs whom? ................................................................................................................... 209
When abnormal becomes normal ............................................................................................... 210
AUTHORITATIVE RESOURCES ......................................................................................................... 211
Official decision-making authority within the organisation ......................................................... 212
Intermediate Nurses - not novices, nor experts ........................................................................ 214
Deciding who is in-charge ........................................................................................................... 214
When things go wrong ................................................................................................................ 217
CHAPTER SUMMARY ....................................................................................................................... 220

CHAPTER SEVEN: KNOWLEDGEABILITY............................................................................. 221
INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................. 221
The autonomy-dependence continuum of decision-making .......................................................... 222
NURSES’ ABILITY AND CAPACITY AS DECISION MAKERS .............................................................. 222
Acquiring decision-making ability ............................................................................................... 225
Routines: enabling and constraining .......................................................................................... 227
INFORMING DECISIONS: WAYS OF KNOWING ................................................................................. 230
Windows of opportunity ............................................................................................................ 230
The ‘evidence’ informing decision-making ................................................................................... 233
EXPERT SYSTEMS AND SPECIALISATION ....................................................................................... 235
Technology - advances and dilemmas ......................................................................................... 236
Appearing not to make decisions ............................................................................................... 239
RISK, UNCERTAINTY AND DECISION-MAKING............................................................................. 240
Day-to-day practice minimising risk .......................................................................................... 241
Nurses’ over and under-confidence as decision makers .............................................................. 243
TRUST AND COLLABORATION ....................................................................................................... 245
EMOTIONS AND DECISION-MAKING ............................................................................................ 248
Unspoken concerns ....................................................................................................................... 252
EVALUATING OUTCOMES ........................................................................................................... 255
Comparing us with them .............................................................................................................. 256
Internal evaluation of decision outcomes .................................................................................... 257
THE HIDDEN SIDE OF NURSES’ DECISION-MAKING - UNSUNG HEROES ........................................... 258
QUESTIONING AUTONOMY - CAN OR CAN’T DO? ........................................................................... 260
CHAPTER SUMMARY ....................................................................................................................... 262
CHAPTER EIGHT: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS .................................................................264

INTRODUCTION .....................................................................................................................264

REVISITING THE QUESTIONS ..........................................................................................265

REVISITING DECISION-MAKING THEORY .................................................................269

Individual decision-making ............................................................................................271

Group decision-making ....................................................................................................274

APPLICATION OF STRUCTURATION THEORY – FRIEND AND FOE .................................276

ENSURING TRUSTWORTHINESS THROUGHOUT THE STUDY ........................................276

Investigator responsiveness ..............................................................................................277

 Asking the right questions, looking in the right places .....................................................278

A Participatory approach .................................................................................................278

Increasing awareness: actors are inherently reflexive .........................................................279

Other concerns ..................................................................................................................281

RECOMMENDATIONS AND POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES ....................................................282

Findings and recommendations in nursing practice and education ...................................283

FUTURE RESEARCH .........................................................................................................291

FINAL REFLECTION .........................................................................................................292

REFERENCES .....................................................................................................................293

APPENDICES ....................................................................................................................321

APPENDIX 1: RIGOUR IN QUALITATIVE STUDIES .................................................................321

APPENDIX 2: PROFILE OF NURSE PARTICIPANTS AND ALLOCATED PSEUDONYM ........322

APPENDIX 3: CONSENT TO OBSERVE PRACTICE (PARTICIPANT) ......................................323

APPENDIX 4: CONSENT TO BE INTERVIEWED (INFORMANT) ...........................................324

APPENDIX 5: THE KEY PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM .....................................................325

APPENDIX 6: GLOSSARY OF TERMS ..................................................................................326

APPENDIX 7: THE RENAL UNIT’S NURSING ORGANISATIONAL CHART .................................329

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 4.1: Level of nurse participant involvement ..........................................................98

TABLE 4.2: Brainstorming potential issues for preliminary research plan ..........................99

TABLE 4.3: Carspecken’s 5 stages of critical ethnography aligned with Giddens’

social and system integration .........................................................................................100
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 3.1: Agency-structure duality ................................................................. 82
FIGURE 8.2: The agency-structure duality and its affect on the dialectic of control .... 267
FIGURE 8.3: The interface between the cognitive continuum and the dialectic of control .... 270
FIGURE 8.4: Opinion-autonomy position .......................................................... 272
FIGURE 8.5: Methodical-autonomy position .................................................... 273
FIGURE 8.6: Opinion-dependence position ...................................................... 274
FIGURE 8.7: The nurses’ collective decision-making position and control ............ 275