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JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

The Significance of Gender to Australian Psychiatric Nursing

Thesis submitted by

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For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the School of Nursing Sciences, James Cook University, Townsville.

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ABSTRACT

This research has critically examined, using a historical method and discourse analysis, some of the many issues related to gender in Australian psychiatric nursing. More specifically, it has explored how gender and gender differences amongst Australian psychiatric nurses evolved, their significance, how they are maintained, and some of their continuing influences and effects in respect to the nature and role of the psychiatric nursing profession.

A major focus of the research has been the explication of the published discourse since 1788 in the context of Australia's social and cultural development, including more recent changes in professional and health service organisations and education. These have also been interpreted within the context of international developments, and have contained lines of inquiry relating to gender, the sexual division of labour, role stereotypes, patriarchy, feminism and the history of psychiatry. Using a discourse analysis and historical criticism, the principal aim of the research is a recovery of the past, which seeks to understand more clearly the meaning of associated discourses and texts so they can be used as a knowledge base and a resource. This will enable the current nursing workforce to use these understandings productively and by adding meaning, to benefit from the wisdom of the past.

Recommendations of this thesis include the need for health services and human resources to be more pro-active in adopting gender-neutral recruitment strategies and in constructing nursing as a job for men, and in embracing a less gendered conception of nursing. It is suggested that recruitment should be targeting people who are suited to the work, emphasising the role function and taking a more egalitarian approach.

Whilst gender is important, it is argued that if we continue to assume that only females can care we are taking a shortsighted view, and that many males provide high quality care.

The thesis recommends that the comprehensive nurse education programmes offered by universities and other educational institutions need to increase the psychiatric nursing components of their undergraduate degrees. This extended curriculum should include the topic of gender, as well as the history of psychiatric nursing. The range of skills that particular genders bring to nursing and the crossover of gender markers might be a useful starting point for this.

This research argues that the comprehensive nurse education programmes in Australia do not adequately prepare nurses to work in mental health settings, and that separate training programmes for nurses working in mental health are to be preferred. Psychiatric nursing is conceived as a specialty, which needs to be treated as such.

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Like so many other students research this work draws from many wells and has been inspired by a number of quite diverse contributors. Of these, my loving parents, who in their own ways taught me to do the best that I could and in doing this have something to say about whatever I did in life and to make and take my own chances by challenging the status quo. My mother taught me to try hard and be the best that I could and my father who taught me to be somewhat 'sceptical' of all things which at times translated to dogmatic. My two sisters who often gave me advice and who had to tirelessly contend with me across our formative years were like my parents instrumental in setting me off on this journey. The othermajor inspiration to this work comes from the love of my life, my dear wife Fiona who represents everything in so many ways that I am not. Fiona looks for and finds good in everything and everyone even in adversity. She pushed me to complete this work and has been my inspirational guiding light. Fiona helped me with editorial work and tirelessly steered the ship and loved me unconditionally at the same time. My mother in law Eileen who helped endlessly with our new edition and collectively they kept me on track as best they could. I owe so much to them.

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