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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 other major 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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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Preface 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Choice of Methodology 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 What Evidence Exists for a Historical Discourse Analysis 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Clothe the Bones in Flesh 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Hidden Layers of Significance 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Adding Meaning 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Resisting Physical Decay 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 Summary 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: THE HISTORY OF PSYCHIATRY 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 An Ignorant General Public 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Understanding of Mental Illness 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 An Australian View from England 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Conditions in England during the 18th century 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Workhouses 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Treatment and Poor Law Legislation 60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.8 Medical Attention 62
3.9 Bridewells 64
3.10 The Reform Movement 66
3.11 Lunatics under the Vagrancy Laws 1744 67
3.12 Private madhouses 71
3.13 Regulation 74
3.14 The Significance of the 1774 Act 75
3.15 The King’s Illness 76
3.16 An Australian Perspective 81
3.17 Summary 83

CHAPTER FOUR:
PEOPLE WHO WORKED WITH THE INSANE 84

4.1 Introduction 84
4.2 Two Separate Roles 85
4.3 Biological Features 90
4.4 Scripting and Biogrammar 92
4.5 Self as a Repertoire of Different Masks/Selves 95
4.6 Teamwork 97
4.7 Trade Unions 100
4.8 Gender Schema 102
4.9 Social Learning Theory, Genetics and Games 104
4.10 Feminism 107
4.11 Sexual Division of Labour 112
4.12 Power 115
4.13 Career Choice 116
4.14 Scripted Performance 119
4.15 Can Behaviour and Roles be Determined by Rules? 127
4.16 Realities of Employment: Power, Patriarchy and Capitalism 128
4.17 Different Realities 135
4.18 Patriarchal and Feminist Underpinnings 144
4.19 Text, Language, Discourse and Deconstruction 149
4.20 Occupational Fit 156
4.21 Moving to Gender Neutral 163
4.22 Finances 171
4.23 Finances, Working Conditions and Training 173
4.24 A Cultural Perspective on Gender 175
4.25 Gender Stereotypes 176
4.26 Summary 180

CHAPTER FIVE: THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE 183
5.1 Introduction 183
5.2 A Good Attendant 185
5.3 Asylum Attendants and their Training 188
5.4 Was Custody Best? 195
5.5 A Strange Sort of Care 199
5.6 Skills often Sought from Elsewhere 201
5.7 History of Mental Health Nursing 203
5.8 Asylum in Australia 206
5.9 Yarra Bend 210
5.10 Recruitment 217
5.11 A Family Metaphor 221
CHAPTER SIX: THE LAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

6.1 Introduction

6.2 Crisis Point in Mental Health Care

6.3 Gender as a Prerequisite to Employment

6.4 Identity Crisis

6.5 Anti-Psychiatry and Media Portrayal

6.6 Mainstreaming

6.7 Is Deinstitutionalisation a Backward Step?

6.8 Nursing Education

6.9 Staffing Policies

6.10 Paradigm Change

6.11 Comprehensive Training

6.12 Summary

CHAPTER SEVEN:

GENDER AND AUSTRALIAN NURSING EDUCATION

7.1 Introduction

7.2 Moving to the Tertiary Sector

7.3 A Comprehensive Course

7.4 Nursing Education in Australian Universities.

7.5 United Kingdom and Ireland

7.6 United States and Canada

7.7 Education and Training Institutions

7.8 Postgraduate
7.9 Rhetoric versus Reality 290
7.10 Teaching and Transition 296
7.11 Knowing over Caring 298
7.12 The Australian Mental Health Nursing Workforce in 1999 298
7.14 Registered Mental Nurses 300
7.15 Inadequate Preparation 306
7.16 Post Graduate Student Profiles 311
7.17 Summary 322

CHAPTER EIGHT: 324
8.1 Introduction 324
8.2 Themes and Tensions 325
8.3 Flexible Boundary Definitions 328
8.4 Masculinities and Femininities 331
8.5 Recommendations 341

REFERENCE LIST: 344
LIST OF FIGURES

**Fig 1** Attendants and nurses posed in front of the Chronic Block, Mont Park. 86

**Fig 2** Certificate from the Lunacy Department. 192

**Fig 3** Coton Hill Asylum in Stafford. 253

**Fig 4** Employment of Registered Mental Health Nurses, Australia, 1987-01. 301

**Fig 5** Age profile of Registered Mental Health Nurses, Australia, 1987 & 2001. 302

**Fig 6** Hours worked by Registered Mental Health Nurses, Australia, 1987 & 2001 303

**Fig 7** Number of university post-graduate courses offered in 2001 By nursing specialty across Australia 311

**Fig 8** shows the total number of university domestic post-graduate nursing students across Australia by course mode of delivery 313

**Fig 9** 2001 total number of university domestic post-graduate nursing students by nursing course specialty across Australia. 314

**Fig 10** 2001 projected university domestic student post-graduate completions by nursing course specialty across Australia. 314

**Fig 11** Recoded and apportioned 2001 projections of university domestic student post-graduate completions by nursing course specialty across Australia. 315

**Fig 12** Recoded and apportioned 2001 projections of university domestic student post-graduate completions by nursing course specialty across Australia 315

**Fig 13** Projected 2001 university domestic student post-graduate completions for mental health courses. 316

**Fig 14** Victorian 2001 projected university domestic student post-graduate course completions by nursing course specialty. 316

**Fig 15** Recoded and apportioned Victorian 2001 projected university domestic student post-graduate course completions by nursing course specialty. 317
Fig 16 Recoded and apportioned Queensland 2001 projected university domestic student post-graduate course completions by nursing course specialty

Fig 17 New South Wales 2001 projected university domestic student post-graduate course completions by nursing course specialty

Fig 18 Recoded and apportioned New South Wales 2001 projected university domestic student post-graduate course completions by nursing course specialty