TOTALLY DIFFERENT:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF
INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY NURSING

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A thesis submitted for the award of PhD in Disability Studies

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February 2007
Dedicated to the memory of

my husband

*Barry Paech*

My hero and my inspiration

3/1/42 - 18/7/03
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>IX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROLOGUE</td>
<td>XII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 SETTING THE SCENE - BACKGROUND TO STUDY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY DEFINED</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 THE HISTORY OF INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY NURSING</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 WORLD TRENDS IN DEINSTITUTIONALISATION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 DEINSTITUTIONALISATION IN AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.1 The South Australian Context</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.1.1 The Psychiatric Hospitals</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5.1.2 The Centre</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 THE ROLE OF THE REGISTERED NURSE</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6.1 The Nursing Service at the Centre</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 RELEVANCE AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 RESEARCH QUESTIONS</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9 THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10 SUMMARY</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 HEALTH CARE AND NURSING</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 ILLNESS IN PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 SYNDROMES AND COMMON CONDITIONS</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 Epilepsy</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 Cerebral Palsy</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.3 Autism Spectrum Disorders</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.4 Down Syndrome</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.5 Communication Issues</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.6 Gaining Client Consent</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.1 Dual Disability</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.2 Schizophrenia</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.3 Depression</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.4 Bipolar Affective Disorder</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.5 Anxiety Disorders</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.6 Assessment of Psychiatric Problems</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.7 Providing Appropriate Care</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 MEETING THE HEALTH NEEDS OF AN AGEING POPULATION</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.1 The Statistics</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.2 Ageing and Down Syndrome</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.3 Health Issues</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4 Accommodation Issues</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5.3.3 The Medical Practice .......................................................... 82
4.5.3.4 The Volunteer Service .......................................................... 83
4.5.4 The Culture ............................................................................... 83

4.6 GAINING ENTRANCE ................................................................................. 84
4.6.1 Cultural Immersion ........................................................................... 84
4.6.2 The Orientation ............................................................................... 85

4.7 THE CLIENT ................................................................................................. 87

4.8 THE PARTICIPANTS ....................................................................................... 87

4.9 ANALYSIS ..................................................................................................... 91
4.9.1 Organisation of the Data ...................................................................... 91
4.9.2 Clustering Similar Data ....................................................................... 93
4.9.3 Finding Common Themes ...................................................................... 95

4.10 RIGOUR ....................................................................................................... 96

4.11 SUMMARY ................................................................................................ 98

CHAPTER 5 RESEARCH QUESTION, PART ONE
WHAT MAKES IT INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY NURSING? ............... 99

5.1 INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................... 99

5.2 CARING FOR THE CLIENT WHO IS INSTITUTIONALISED ................. 101
5.2.1 Having Many Varied Skills ............................................................... 101
5.2.2 Clients have Complex Care Requirements ...................................... 103
5.2.3 Registered Nurses as Specialists ....................................................... 106

5.3 QUALITIES OF THE RN IN THE DISABILITY SECTOR ......................... 110
5.3.1 It Takes Special Kinds of skills ......................................................... 110
5.3.2 Providing a Sense of Family .............................................................. 112

5.4 WORKING WITHIN A DIFFERENT PARADIGM ...................................... 113
5.4.1 The Institutional Model of Care ......................................................... 113
5.4.2 Rewards of the position ................................................................. 115
5.4.3 Downsides to the Role ................................................................. 117
5.4.4 "The hub of illness care" and future plans ...................................... 124

5.5 HAVING TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR A LARGE NUMBER OF
UNREGULATED WORKERS ........................................................................... 127
5.5.1 Interaction with Registered Nurses .................................................. 128
5.5.2 The Carer as a Credentialed Worker .............................................. 131
5.5.3 Training for the Carer Role ............................................................... 133

5.6 HAVING TO WORK ALONGSIDE MANY PROFESSIONAL GROUPS ......... 134
5.6.1 Enrolled nurses ................................................................................ 134
5.6.2 Attitudes of general hospital nurses .............................................. 136
5.6.3 Agency nurses .......................................................... 139
5.6.4 The allied health team ................................................................. 140

5.7 HAVING DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL NEEDS .................................... 141
5.7.1 The need for education ................................................................. 142
5.7.2 Management and training ............................................................... 144

5.8 SUMMARY ................................................................................................ 146
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-1. Summary of health problems more common to people with intellectual disability.................................................................22

Table 4-1. Positions and numbers of employees related to the categories of staff at The Centre that are discussed in the current research ..........79

Table 4-2. Information on the position and length of service of interview participants........................................................................90

Table 4-3. Thematic summary of the research .................................................................95

Table 5-1. Themes, subthemes and concepts related to the first part of the research question: “What is intellectual disability nursing?” ......100

Table 6-1. Themes, Subthemes and Concepts related to the research question "What are the every day rituals, norms and patterns within the disability culture that shape and influence disability nursing for the registered nurse?". .................................................................150

Table 6-2. An organisational chart showing the structure within the areas being considered in the current research...............................151

Table 8-1. An example of a nursing model that could possibly provide effective outcomes for clients with an intellectual disability ......229
ABSTRACT
This study adopted an ethnographic approach to examine the role of the Registered Nurse (RN) in the intellectual disability sector. The research setting (The Centre) is a residential facility for clients with intellectual disability in the northern suburbs of Adelaide that opened in 1971 and was similar to a hospital with the same hierarchy of nursing. Mental deficiency nurse training was conducted there until the 1990s but that qualification is no longer recognised. The Centre is under the umbrella of a large state disability organisation that is in the process of moving clients of the service from institutions (the Centre) to community living options such as group homes.

The cessation of mental deficiency nurse training and the introduction of deinstitutionalisation were considered to impact on client health and in the late 1990s a 24 hour nursing service was commenced. There was strong anecdotal evidence the service should be evaluated. A review of the literature found some research had been conducted in overseas countries with a focus on deinstitutionalisation but with a paucity of interest in the role of the RN, particularly in Australia.

Ethnography, first used in anthropology as a way of describing different cultures, was chosen as the research methodology because the researcher wanted to discover how the culture influenced the role of the RN. The researcher is an RN employed in the area. As an ethnographer and participant observer, the researcher became the data collection instrument. The entire culture is considered to be the sample in ethnography and data took the form of hundreds of hours of field note entries and interview transcripts.

Following analysis, the findings were presented in themes answering the research question which was in two parts. The first "from the perspective of the nurse, client and other health care professionals, what constitutes intellectual disability nursing?" and secondly "what are the every day rituals, norms and patterns within the disability culture that shape and influence disability nursing for the Registered Nurse?".
"Caring for the client who is institutionalised", "The RN in the disability sector having certain qualities", "Working within a different paradigm", "Having to assume responsibility for large numbers of unregulated workers", "Having to work alongside many professional groups" and "Having different educational needs" are themes which describe the role. Themes describe the diversity of the role and in describing the registered intellectual disability nurse as "different" the role is compared with that of the nurse in other settings. The current research revealed there is a need for more health related education for unregulated workers and specific intellectual disability education for registered and enrolled nurses.

Themes that answer the second part of the research question are "hierarchical structure", "the Registered Nurse's position" and "role confusion". The non-nursing management at the top of the hierarchical ladder was found to significantly limit the role of the RN who was afforded no opportunity for leadership. Confusion over the RN's role and indeed individual workers' roles was observed at all levels. Findings suggest much stronger nursing leadership is required to provide advocacy and holistic care for the client and education for the carer. An outcome of the current research was the development of a model for intellectual disability nursing (see Table 8-1).
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis entitled 'Totally Different: An Ethnographic Account of Intellectual disability Nursing' and submitted for the award of PhD Disability Studies, is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis (or part of the same) has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Signed............................................................

Date.................................

Signed................................................................

Date........................................
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of my two supervisors. As primary supervisor, Dr Brian Matthews shared his vast knowledge of disability studies and I appreciated opportunities to expand and to share my knowledge. You also showed such empathy to my personal loss. Thank you for your tireless encouragement, support and advice.

My co-supervisor Professor Sally Borbasi transferred to an interstate university during my final year but chose to do distance supervision, which I appreciate. Sally provided an expert nursing perspective and knowledge of qualitative research methods. Thank you for your wonderful support and encouragement.

My mother, Sonia, your encouraging words have meant so much and kept me going. Thank you.

My sons, Matt, Ben and Sam, my daughter-in-law Christine, and my seven grandchildren, you put me high on a pedestal. Thank you for believing in me.

I have been blessed with a large network of family and friends who have provided support and often a much needed escape from my work. Thank you for believing that I could finish this thesis.

I am particularly grateful for the encouragement and inspiration of my friend Barbara. Thank you.

I am indebted to Richard Bruggemann, CEO of IDSC at the time of this research, and Dale Hassam, former director of Strathmont Centre who welcomed my research, offering so much assistance and allowing me to observe their world.
I appreciate the support, friendship and valuable insights of the Health Services team at Strathmont Centre: Frank Walsh, manager, Janet Jones, nurse manager, and the dedicated team of registered and enrolled nurses who adopted my project as their project. Thank you for a wonderful team effort.

To the parents and families of IDSC clients, and friends and volunteers, thank you for your valuable contribution.

The villa managers, shift supervisors and direct care workers at Strathmont Centre have enthusiastically supported my research. Thank you for sharing your time and experience so generously.

I also acknowledge the contribution of the staff of Minda Incorporated, Royal District Nursing Society, Modbury Hospital and Royal Adelaide Hospital. The nursing departments of the University of South Australia and Flinders University provided input into aspects of general nursing and the Nurses Board of South Australia were a useful resource.

The Strathmont Centre library staff provided much of the literature used in this study. They did so uncomplainingly and promptly, and often with a little welcome humour. Thank you.

Finally, to the clients at Strathmont Centre and those in the community who inspired this research. Thank you for accepting me into your lives. Many of you have become my friends. You may never read this work, but it is for you.
PROLOGUE

What do I do now? How do I start the fieldwork that is at the heart of my profession? How do I engage the human subjects who can enliven my research and can make my theoretical ideas anthropological.....this initial ethnographic treatment produces both the context and the scaffolding of fieldwork. (Holmes & Marcus in Denzin & Lincoln, editors 2005, p.1102)

Indeed field work is a very demanding preoccupation with the culture and requires total immersion. During my breaks while conducting field work, I would drive to the north eastern boundary of the large estate and view what remains of the largest institution of its kind in the southern hemisphere, but now scattered throughout the community. I found that I could sit there quietly beneath the large shady trees, reflecting and writing field notes. One day I walked across the concrete slabs that were all that was left of two villas, in fact one was demolished during field work. It appeared demolition had taken place in a hurry leaving the roads that once led to these former villas still in place but with nowhere to go. Tiles on the floors where the bathrooms had been, and brick planter boxes, were signs these used to be homes.

I cast my eyes toward a long pathway which has pencil pine trees standing proudly down each side leading to the remaining villas. To the left are some unused buildings and directly ahead the villas where remaining clients live. On the right is the large car park and beyond that the staff development centre which was once the school of nursing. Not so many years ago, student mental deficiency nurses and psychiatric nurses sat in the class rooms and prepared for their respective roles.

If only the walls of these buildings could talk, I mused, pondering on the tales they would tell. What could this institution’s history add to the stories this researcher has been told? I can almost hear the laughter of children, playing in the courtyard after their lessons have finished for the day. I see in my mind the past charge nurses who have been described as stern women who had junior nurses trembling in their shoes.

My own journey to becoming an intellectual disability RN was to take many years, beginning in 1977, with my first nursing experience as a personal care attendant in a
large institution. However it was not until 1983 that I was first exposed to people with intellectual disability. As a personal care attendant, I was assigned by an agency to work at a nursing home for people with intellectual disability and it was there that I experienced first hand the physically exhausting and emotionally challenging role of caring for people with profound intellectual and physical disabilities.

In fact that nursing home is referred to in the literature review as its closure played a significant role in shaping the future care of people with intellectual disability in South Australia. At the same time the next decade of my career saw me graduate as both an enrolled general and enrolled psychiatric nurse. Disenchanted with the enrolled nurse role, in 1990 I embarked on a bachelor of nursing degree. As a newly Registered Nurse, I completed a graduate nurse program at a large institution where I was again exposed to working with people with severe disabilities.

In 1995, I graduated as a registered psychiatric nurse with a graduate diploma in mental health. I spent the next five years employed at a psychiatric hospital which I did not particularly enjoy. I missed working with people with disabilities in a residential setting. On the advice of a colleague, I applied to The Centre. I had never even been to The Centre, I did not know anything about it, but I applied.

I immediately found the role of health care nurse to be rewarding and refreshing. I formed an easy rapport with the clients who appreciated my nursing actions. The staff seemed to value my skills. However, I felt that my knowledge of intellectual disability was lacking.

I was not long in the position when I began to notice that the RN was not included in long term planning for clients and there was limited communication between management and the nurses. The RNs, it seemed were there just to do nursing tasks. I completed a Master of Nursing Science in 2001, which sparked my interest in research. I began to ask questions such as "What is this type of nursing and where do Registered Nurses fit into the organisation?".
This research began as a result of curiosity about this very different culture and indeed totally different way of nursing. In fact a review of available literature demonstrated a need for research that will help to clarify the position of the Registered Nurse in the disability context. Research questions were posed and the answers reveal RNs continue to play a crucial role in health planning and health care for people with intellectual disability. Furthermore effective nursing leadership and research are required to facilitate change. The vision of the 1970s has changed but a challenge exists for registered intellectual disability nurses to keep abreast of trends in nursing and plan for the future needs of people with intellectual disability.